



COMMUNICATION PROCESSES VOLUME 3

# communication, culture and confrontation

edited by  
**bernard bel**  
**jan brouwer**  
**biswajit das**  
**vibodh parthasarathi**  
**guy poitevin**



# COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND CONFRONTATION

# COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

**Series Editors:** Bernard Bel, Jan Brouwer, Biswajit Das,  
Vibodh Parthasarathi, Guy Poitevin

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AND CONFRONTATION**

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**The SAGE Team:** Elina Majumdar, Jayshree Kewalramani and Trinankur Banerjee

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# **INTRODUCTION:**

## **Remoulding the 'Cultural' as the 'Contentious'**

**BERNARD BEL, JAN BROUWER, BISWAJIT DAS,  
VIBODH PARTHASARATHI, GUY POITEVIN**

The first volume in this series on communication processes focused on the media, techniques and technology of communication. The second volume addressed the 'relations of communication', embracing both the particular type of human rapport that each specific medium gives support to, and the forms of social relation that the media are called to serve. In order to better describe the articulation of these systems of relations in the contradictory, tension-driven and ever-changing framework of society, the emphasis was on the function of symbolization as an agency of correlation specific to the human mind. Communication appears to be a matter of symbolic forms that tend to shape the dialectics, that is to say, the dialogue, interaction, links, rapports, osmosis or encounters between human beings under the spell of the systems of domination and/or appropriation that control them. This third volume specifically focuses on those symbolic forms themselves, gathered under the wide category of the 'cultural' or, alternatively, 'cultural forms'.

We cannot escape being once again driven away from the media of communication with their underpinning symbolic artefacts, and from the social systems of relations that make symbolic forms of communication instrumental in reaching their ends, towards another level of analysis where forms, ways and media of communication appear in connection with the culture of the communicators and their audiences. Cultural patterns, systems of representations and knowledge and cognitive structures contrive modes, forms and means of communication

within given communities and between different communities. Systems of communication mirror systems of cognition. Social forms of symbolic communication drive us towards their anthropological foundations in the cultural moorings of the communities.

Second, we cannot, in this respect, escape an immediately obvious fact that we take as point of departure: symbolic forms of social communication can hardly be reduced to a comprehensive set of stable patterns that would dissolve ideologies, iniquity and social conflicts into a gentle flow of self-regulating processes governed by universal concepts. This had been the dream—or rather the imposture—of the market-driven global world imagined by the managers of massmedia. This consensual view abruptly faded away when the fear of international terrorism revived the evidence that communication can be at the service of ideological interests that had not been anticipated by the thinkers of the electronic age. Symbolic forms of communication are transactional in nature, and very few transactions, if any, may be disentangled from patterns of dominance and resistance.

We wish to emphasize the intimate love/hatred binding that inextricably pervades the rapport of power and culture. We are as much concerned in this volume with cultural configurations that display themselves as forms of communication, weave human beings into collectives and link collectives with one another in one form or another of constantly evolving social binding, as with the power parameter that permeates them. Much in the same way that symbols cannot be reduced to bytes and pixels, cultures cannot be reduced to sets of items traded in the hegemonic space of global communication. This is despite the fact that this new space of communication has produced its own ideological pitfall by introducing itself as the end of a historical process whose ultimate ‘show’ must have been the battle won by capitalism over socialism. In her pioneering work, Waring (1988, 1999) brilliantly pointed out the fallacy of thinking in terms of global economics, when the system has become so selective of its gain/loss categories that it denies the ‘reckonability’—hence, any sort of recognition—of such vital human activities as household work, child education, care of the environment, etc.

Similarly, a recent report submitted at the Second Specialized International Conference of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, pointed to the ‘paradoxes’, ‘biases’ and ‘schizophrenic approach of the evaluation of sustainable development policies in the

dual societies' on account in particular of 'anthropological blindness' (Casteigts 2002). The report underscored, as a result, the cultural fracture prevailing between the administration and the population. It geographically traced and historically dated the model as being a deliberate will to impose as universally valid a model designed by the 'liberal Europe of the industrial revolution and the twentieth century America'. Born in a particular era and historical context, the model was consequently unfit for being transferred to other geographical and historical contexts. The report denounced as a blunder the will to impose it as a reference for evaluation of economic policies to the whole planet. It argued that this actually amounts 'to enforce[ing] a self-alienation', which results in 'the concerned states being forced, in good faith, to sacrifice the genuine interests of their local populations in the name of an economic rationality believed to be a scientific model of development' (ibid.: 13–16).

There is, consequently, nothing surprising about the fact that a wide number of so-called Social Development Consulting Pvt. Ltd agencies authoritatively—that is, on the strength of an alleged modern science of business management systems—try to shape voluntary social action into a social commodity for institutions of social work, and appreciate its value with parameters learnt from management experts. Social consultants set themselves up as petty world development economists. In their discourse, human agency becomes a matter of social engineering, people's cooperation an affair of scientific techniques, development a part of trade organization, expert use of modern mass media a modern name for active democracy, and justice a checklist for administratively correct procedures. In short, communication has found its location as a component of management system science.

This is how neo-liberal globalization protects its ideology of self-achievement, competition and domination by concealing it behind the shabby images of a consumer-friendly market allegedly driving humankind to a new era of affluence (Stiglitz 2002). It eliminates the 'political' by replacing democratic decision making with the universal rules of management dictated by non-elected bodies such as the World Trade Organization and social consultancy agencies. It further eliminates the 'cultural' by reducing it to marketable objects travelling through the modern communication channels. From this viewpoint, communication is merely a technical issue of manageable complexity.

This is not our approach. 'At present it is incumbent upon us all to resuscitate what remains of a universe of discourse, political language, and democratic vocabulary' (Carey 1989: 139).

## Terms for a Field of Contending Forces

A first handicap of a conceptual nature immediately stands in our way. We have to cope with a number of vague terms, readymade assumptions and worn clichés that happen to be easily available and commonly used. They may even be taken for granted by communication agencies, social actors and theoretical analysts. We need, therefore, to clarify our own terms at the outset.

We do not understand *culture* as a substantive concept, but a dialectic category to be apprehended as a field of contending forces: a *milieu of exchange, encounter, confrontation and possibly conflict*. We assume that, as a rule, communication of idioms is one of the secrets of cultural creativity and one of the main channels of transformation or evolution of human societies. The key to symbolic innovation is interactivity and interbreeding (Martin 2001, 2002).

As a consequence, our focus can by no means be any delusive essentialist representation of culture as a general category, with a privileged emphasis put, for instance, on 'elite' or, on the contrary, 'popular' culture. This means that culture is essentially of a communicational nature on two accounts. First, it is instrumental and subservient to the aims of societal construction as it offers each collective, whether a small local community or large regional entity, a symbolic means of social binding. We should, therefore, activate all the static categories of culture perceived as symbolic systems as they tend to build up orders and secure social cohesiveness. Cultures 'perform' viable collectives.

However, the consensus that they expect to that effect can never be secured, though they may try to obtain it per force. Rifts, dissent, breach of consensus, and alternative or deviant practices are always present. The 'counter-cultural' roles that some particular cultures play at a certain period of time in a given cultural milieu, when some sections depart from the established norms, codes or values hitherto received by the majority of others, testify to the emergence of repressed voices. Counter-cultures may arise in any field and whatever the latter's idiom:

music, literature, narratives, performing arts, social action, community festivals, philosophy, symbolic or ideological production such as ethics, legal systems, codes of conducts, norms and values, daily behaviour and lifestyle. Culture thus proves to be a matter of politics on a second and far-reaching account, that is, as a confrontation of claims to different, let alone opposite, projects of sociality. We might articulate this heterogeneity of apparently irreconcilable visions and wills by measuring the distance that sets apart the antagonistic poles of the literate and illiterate, elite and popular, dominant and subaltern, one and other, reason and image, concept and practice, fact and emotion, event and theory, observation and categorization, conduct and insight, and so on. The contributions in this volume are meant to show that such abstract dichotomous concepts sometimes available in culture studies to characterize the distinctive markers of 'cultural worlds' standing apart from one another are unwarranted and sterile. Such poles do not exist but out of a will to create a cultural hegemony on the part of those in a position of domination or alleged superiority claimed on the strength of 'monologically authoritative interpretations' (Mills 1991: 17).

All such interpretations are to be denounced and rejected in the name of culture, which we understand as existing only as a two-way transitive process, that is, as interaction or negotiation. This volume is intended to show several forms of such processes. The significant fact remains, nevertheless, that transactions between contesting world-views do not always take place out of spontaneous needs or free will to reappropriate and own a heritage. They may well be enforced out of a will to dominate and control. In both cases a confrontation takes place, sometimes peacefully, sometimes violently.

By *confrontation* we understand the questioning to which given forms are constantly subject on account of a multitude of locators and social actors who, diachronically and synchronically, do interact with one another. A living cultural constellation is the one that operates under tension. Contention, reinterpretation, manipulation, appropriation, imposition, ascendancy, repetition, enforcement, refusal, denial, reappraisal and encounter are some of the processes of culture as confrontation.

Let us immediately eschew a possible misconception by stressing the point that cultural violence is not borne by cultural differences.

It is carried out by a will to social discrimination by particular social agents. Social or political clashes in the name of culture are actually to be predicated upon a sheer want of culture. They stage social figures of communication that are directly the reverse of any genuine cultural encounter as we figure it out. They actually are its antinomy because they are prompted by a denial of interbreeding through sustained and fruitful communication of idioms.

Culture as encounter should, therefore, by no means be confused with the 'clash of civilizations' that Samuel Huntington (1998) designated as the front line of the battles to be waged in the twenty-first century. 'Culture' no more than 'identity', 'nation' and their derivatives, 'cultural identity', 'cultural nationalism', 'ethnic cleansing' and the like can ever be social actors. They are simply abstract though mesmerizing signifiers, but with no historical agents such as a state, class, trade union, political leader, community organization, mob, warlord or mafia. Clashes such as those to which Huntington refers exist only between socio-political forces competing for ascendancy and domination as collective actors, and instrumentalizing culture and cultural violence as a weapon to massively arouse masses and thus negotiate their access to power.<sup>1</sup>

The immediate, and sometimes fatal, macro-political efficacy of such signifiers dramatically highlights the relevance of several micro studies gathered in this volume. They are likely to give some insight to the ways for cultural forms to socially, that is, politically, operate. They may then work as a warning by showing how the discriminatory processes that they unleash are alien to culture and kill attempts of genuine cultural encounter.

As a consequence, the focus of cultural studies may be seen as oscillating, on the whole, from one extreme to the other, namely, going from the most repetitive models of interaction, mimetic modes of transmission and, as a result, static and consensual forms of communication, to creative models of symbolic innovation through breach of continuity, inversion or simply denunciation of consensus and radical semantic reappraisals. However, denial and denunciation, reappraisals and re-evaluation are no breach of communication, but forms of antagonistic communication. We may, therefore, oppose as antithetical counter-culture to control-culture, although both are only ideal and static constructs. In reality, both trends result in antagonistic interaction, the dialectic embraces the semantic relevance of that which is

due to their contention to exert over the same field but differently. The cultural rift is in that difference, a difference that makes sense in the same milieu of confrontation.

By *milieu* we understand a symbolic space in which the confrontation takes place. It comprises a multitude of isomorphic forms, a number of sets of related constitutive components of any type, which on account of their isomorphism can entertain rapport among themselves. The possibility of such rapport and connections is what makes the space symbolic, namely, constructed of elements pieced together, linked in one way or the other. The space is symbolic on account of the nexus that prevails between all the components.

By *isomorphism* we understand a logical link, a semantic affinity, a structural correspondence, a logical connection that explains for the possibility of dialogue, contention, reference, borrowing and reinterpretation between the various forms, levels and domains. Without such isomorphism, no interaction would be possible. There is no dialogue between idioms that semantically have nothing in common.

The concept of isomorphism proves helpful in this regard to understand three general features that constantly characterize the cultural forms studied in this volume. These features ought not to stand as stumbling blocks against our effort of insight to their nature and communicational function. They are, on the contrary, essential to processes of interaction and interbreeding that is—shall we emphasize it again—essential to the civilizational progress of humankind.

First, it is particularly relevant to recognize that each symbolic device is permanently subject to the demands of environmental changes, the urge from within, of internal expectations at variance with established norms, and the challenge of external counter-currents and alien pressures. All cultural forms and meanings are a mix resulting from the interplay of a complex historical dialectics. The strength of an individual or collective cultural configuration—its capability to meaningfully and purposively confront these changes, survive and progress—is a function of their competence to reconstruct and integrate the alien within their own symbolic systems.

Second, one may be struck by the performative nature of popular cultures. Here, we roughly use the term ‘popular’ in reference to cultural forms that originate from, and are specific to, powerless social sections, such as the working class in industrialized societies, and in those cohesive communities grounded in ‘traditions’ that circulate by

word of mouth only; the folk and its lore as opposed to the dominant classes of literati. People's cultural forms do not appear nor stand as theoretical statements, abstract representations and value judgements *per se*. They enact and represent.

Such is the case with all the cultural forms represented in this volume as much as the previous ones. A song, a tune, a drama, an image at home, a poster on the street, a narrative, a film, a ritual, a deity, a domestic health practice, a traditional agricultural technique, a craft, an occupational skill, a village festival, a pilgrimage to a holy places, a carnival, folk art, bazaar art, street drama and the like perform: they carry out something by procedures. People's cultural forms are practices that do not dissociate a form, meaning, human rapport and social status. They do not incorporate a concept; they directly act out an insight. They are an event that members of a human collective identify with or belong in. This may be the secret of their power: their competence to create a community, a class, a group or, in other terms, their communicative efficiency. This gives each cultural form the status of a symbolic device binding people. Culture is communication in the sense that the communicative efficiency of a cultural form is what distinguishes a cultural form as performative of a collective from a means of communication, which is nothing more than a carrier of information.

Third, we may analytically identify seven levels or cultural forms of expression and communication and consider, at first sight, that their tight semantic interlinking and determinant correspondence is specific to lively and resilient popular—whether 'old' or 'new'—traditions. This is what the minute studies in this volume will show as they often simultaneously touch upon the following various modes and strategies of communicative interaction:

1. **practical know-how:** occupational skill such as birthing practices, handicraft and farming methods;
2. **physical forms:** material culture such as artefacts, traditions of performing arts, customs and lifestyles;
3. **networks of relation:** links and interactions binding individuals into particular social configurations, such as a body of laws applied in a given community or at a given period in the life of that community;
4. **representations:** mental forms and immaterial images associated with various kinds of practices;

5. **rituals and symbolic conducts:** corresponding to the previous levels;
6. **narratives and discourses:** that carry theoretical and ideological framework and account for the different types of conducts, systems of social regulations, legal codifications and jurisprudence and
7. **means of preservation, transmission and circulation:** such as songs, proverbs and sayings that specifically encapsulate and carry knowledge.

All these cultural forms act in unison as communication vehicles, each of them in its specific capacity to build and maintain cohesive collectives, binding individuals into distinct communities, and also the various communities into an integrated social fabric.

Eventually all these considerations may suggest a complex—that is to say, anything but linear—model likely to emerge from the studies in this volume with regard to processes of culture substantively construed as a matter of communicational transitivity against all essentialist approaches. The eighteen case studies bring an abundant and purposively varied material for a broad and open-ended framework to be furthermore systematically chalked out, on the one hand, as the secret of any vigorous or/and overpowering cultural constellation, whether traditional or modern, and, on the other, as a key to apprehend the communicational efficiency of any such constellation of cultural forms.

## Conflicting Stakes: Power and Ambivalence

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A second serious handicap of a theoretical nature stands in our way once we set to go beyond the cultural forms in themselves: that of communicational efficiency, that is, the way these forms are instrumentalized to shape a social fabric. All our case studies point in this respect to the importance of two characteristics that are particularly significant and run across all of them as golden threads, those of power and ambivalence, if not even ambiguity.

From a communicational point of view, ‘the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate, and display’ reality, that is, to construct it in expressive forms—cultural artefacts and communicative

practices—and then to convince by getting them actually shared by others:

[I]n our time, reality is scarce because of access: so few command the machinery for its determination. Some get to speak and some to listen, some to write and some to read, some to film and some to view. It is fine to be told that we are the species that actively creates the world and then simultaneously to be told that we are part of the subspecies denied access to the machinery by which this miracle is pulled off ....

Therefore, the site where artists paint, writers write, speakers speak, film makers film, broadcasters broadcast is simultaneously the site of social conflict over the real. It is not a conflict over ideas as disembodied forces. It is not a conflict over technology. It is not a conflict over social relations. It is a conflict over the simultaneous co-determination of ideas, technique, and social relations. It is above all a conflict not over the effects of communication but of the acts and practices that are themselves the effects. (Carey 1989: 87)

Ambivalence, let alone ambiguity, is the second characteristic feature of the use of cultural forms in processes of communicational intercourse. Instead of clear-cut polarization, we observe deep, multifarious and farreaching moves of transaction, whatever be superficial and temporary evidences to the contrary. An amazing and bewildering variety of terms crop up in the minds of a number of scholars studying various moments in the history of intense civilizational encounters.<sup>2</sup> They all eventually point to moves of articulation, negotiation, interweaving, reinterpretation, etc. All these attempts could be categorized as multilateral transitivity, the implication being that in the process the forms are genuinely exchanged to the extent they are invested in the transaction with a more or less different value. As a result, the same form is shared, but with a difference. Ambivalence is an unavoidable mode of cultural exchange, reappropriation and contention (Poitevin 2001, 2002: 81–87).

The relevance of both these parameters is determinant in the studies in this volume and essential to the broad model that is implicitly or explicitly reflected in them.

## Notes

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1. The controversy raised by Huntington's article is well known. He was accused of grossly simplifying reality, neglecting the role of states, implicitly nurturing a covert indulgence towards forms of extremism by recognizing them as a real force, putting the West on alert, seeing the increasing interaction between eight civilizations (Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Orthodox Slav, Latin American and African) as a cause of crisis and deterioration, assuming a demise of ideologies, and even hiding a North American agenda by providing the United States with an alibi for enforcing a globalization ultimately meant to shroud the planet in a blanket of cultural uniformity, thereby permanently eliminating all further prospect of inter-cultural war—let us read cultural diversity and autonomy, inter-cultural confrontation and interbreeding (Sauquet 1997).
2. Students of various domains substitute models of complex negotiation to antithetic conceptualizations, for instance, in the history of Indian nationalism (Chatterjee 1986; Dalmia 1999; Jaffrelot 1999) and in cultural anthropology (Nandy 1983; Poitevin and Rairkar 1996; Richman 1992; Thapar 2000).

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# Part 1

CONFLICTING

STAKES

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# INTRODUCTION

EDITORS

This first part comprises three preliminary contributions on account of their wider, theoretical and methodological scopes, thanks in particular to their emphasis on both the parameters of power and ambivalence. They give an opportunity to appropriately display their wide-ranging effects from three general and very contextually different vantage points, that is, discourse, practice and system, before observing their working in detail in the other case studies of the book.

## Discourses on Popular Cultures

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The study 'From the Popular to the People' by Guy Poitevin, shows how the term 'popular cultures' is highly problematic<sup>1</sup> and simply adds to the confusion. Should the 'people' be really equated to the 'popular'? By pointing to culture as a stake of contention in power conflicts (Chombart de Lauwe 1975; de Certeau 1990, 1993; Laclau 1977; Ostor 1981; Touraine 1977, 1981), the 'popular' might be understood as referring to authentic and free forms emanating from the 'people' against, for instance, a debased mass or 'commercial culture' (Naremore and Brantlinger 1991), a dominant 'elite culture',<sup>2</sup> or a repressive 'ruling class culture'.<sup>3</sup> Various agencies strive either for controlling the market of cultural goods or for imposing particular norms of quality control to the same goods.

Culture struggle starts with the very definition of the concepts of 'culture' and 'popular culture', and must be understood in terms of a contest to rule over the symbolic systems that give meaning to human experience and cohesion to human collectives. The 'popular' tends thus

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to be currently structured as a homogeneous,<sup>4</sup> singular politico-cultural impulse that feeds into and through appropriate cultural forms. For example, British rulers in India were aware that they could play the cards of both continuity and change by introducing a system of uniform territorial rules based on universalistic norms articulated on authoritative orthodox Brahmanic laws (see Bates in this volume).

‘Popular cultures’, as a consequence, often happen to be advocated and called to display alternative forms of communication pregnant with more genuinely humane contents. To the industrial supply of ‘mass’ symbolic products, they substitute native initiatives. To so-called ‘mainstream’ cultures shaped, spread and enforced by communication technologies, they oppose creative forms.

The capacity to constitute classes and individuals as a popular force—that is the nature of political and cultural struggle: to make the divided classes and the separated peoples—divided and separated by culture as much as by other factors—into a popular democratic cultural force. (Hall 1981: 239)

This agonistic articulation of the social into a clear-cut divide of repression and rebellion raises two questions. The first is that of the social relations of production and exchange of cultural forms, representations and constructs (*ibid.*: 232). Culture should be apprehended with reference to that struggle of classes, groups, individual and collective agencies for the control of the means of production and exchange of cultural goods on a market, which the present technologies of communication open to the dimensions of the whole world.

The second question is a consequent effort to transcend the binary of the aforesaid approaches and tentative definitions. The worldwide extension of the competitive field of cultural contention leaves no room any more for a clear-cut dichotomous<sup>5</sup> opposition of the ‘dominated’ to the ‘dominant’, a dichotomy that was already problematic in the past.<sup>6</sup>

It is no more possible in the past than in the present to locate a source of popular cultural activity or expression which is not, at the same time, profoundly shot through with elements of the dominant culture and, in some sense, located within it as well as against it. That is what a dominant culture does; it dominates, it constitutes the

magnetic pole of the cultural field which other cultures may oppose or seek to disentangle themselves from, but which they cannot evade entirely. (Bennett et al. 1986: 18)

By the same token, the members of subordinate classes never encounter or are oppressed by a dominant ideology in some pure or class essentialist form; bourgeois ideology is encountered only in the compromised forms it must take in order to provide some accommodation for opposing class values. (ibid.: xv)

The binary partition is grounded in the highly problematic substantive entity of the ‘people’ as a unitary form or a specific historical formation nurturing a definite socio-political aim. It fails for this reason to perceive how and why the ‘people’ may break down into a bundle of heterogeneous forms, let alone opposite practices. The ‘popular’ is the outcome and not the source of a number of clashing interests. It appears in history as a highly disparate cultural idiom because it is brought about by antagonistic historical socio-cultural forces (Martín-Barbero 1993: 5–147). Thus, an approach sometimes referred to as a neo-Gramscian hegemony theory considers

[P]opular culture as a site of struggle between the forces of resistance of subordinate groups in society, and the forces of incorporation of dominant groups in society. Popular culture in this usage is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging from below spontaneously oppositional culture .... Rather it is a terrain of exchange between the two; a terrain marked by resistance and incorporation. (Storey 1993: 13)

The turn to Gramsci and the benefits of the theory of hegemony for the study of popular culture is prompted by Gramsci’s radicalism within traditional Marxism, which lies in his resistance to an orthodox class-based formulation and view of ideology (Turner 1990: 211–25). Gramsci departs from Marxist tradition

[I]n arguing that the cultural and ideological relations between ruling and subordinate classes in capitalist societies consist less in the *domination* of the latter by the former than in the struggle for hegemony—that is, for moral, cultural, intellectual and, thereby, political leadership over the whole of the society—between the

ruling class and, as the principal subordinate class, the working class. (Bennett et al. 1986: xiv)

The idea of hegemony does not suggest that domination is achieved by manipulating the worldview of the masses. Rather; it argues that in order for cultural leadership to be achieved, the dominant group has to engage in negotiations with opposing groups, classes, and values—and that these negotiations must result in some *genuine* accommodation. That is, hegemony is not maintained through the obliteration of the opposition but through the *articulation* of opposing interests into the political affiliations of the hegemonic group. (Turner 1990: 211–12)

Simple and straight oppositions dissolve, while mobile and provisional combinations deriving from different class locations shape cultural confrontations. The outcome is a mix of imposition, subordination, opposition, spontaneity and enforcement in multiple permutations and unsteady proportions (Bennett et al. 1986: xv–xvi).

## Practices of Counter-culture

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Some cultures play counter-cultural roles at a certain period of time in a given cultural milieu when particular sections depart from the norms, codes or values hitherto received by the majority of others. This may be observed among social sections whose voices are usually repressed in any field (music, literature, narratives, performing arts, community festivals, philosophy, etc.), or more generally whatever the field or the idiom (music, poetry, social action, symbolic or ideological production, deviant behaviour, alternative conducts, etc.). The concept of ‘alternative communication’ carries in this regard a will to emancipation from the control of the communication industry and established symbolic systems of social assimilation. But should the idea be simply equated with ‘non-dominant’ and interventionist attempts of emancipation from the control of the communication industry? Should ‘counter-culture’ be necessarily construed as a culture of ‘resistance’?

The term ‘alternative communication’ is used by Vibodh Parthasarathi in his essay ‘Interventionist Tendencies in Popular Culture’, with reference to ‘media processes arising from and associated with counter-cultural politics’. It might be extended to any sort of contest leading

towards autonomous interventionist tendencies which the 'system' can either not assimilate, or which are directly confrontationalist. In history, there have been articulations of the subordinated that have been made peripheral and viewed either as fossilized remnants or deviant phenomena. Though marginalized, such forms of expression are still vibrant and run contrary to dominant aesthetic values, ideological agendas and organizational set-ups.

Two central issues that had previously been stressed upon by Parthasarathi run once again through the present contribution as leitmotifs in various terms. The first is that the import of any particular instance of opposition to the material, political or symbolic basis of dominant communication is more than a mere assertive performance:

The entry of the underclass into processes of communication signifies not merely a change in social agents. More importantly, it transforms their status from being consumers of mass culture to the producers of a counter-culture; from being the source of information to proactive subjects of images and texts .... This allows articulations in non-standard language in as much as they are an attempt at cultural decolonization. (Parthasarathi 1997: 14)

The second issue is a warning: to equate the 'non-dominant' to the 'alternative' would be a methodological error:

A resurgence of non-dominant communication is indicative of, (1) an ideological assertion of subjugated knowledge-systems and (2) political tendencies which either 'the system' can not assimilate or are foreign to its needs. However ... there are instances where non-dominant modes of communication in fact (re)assert elements of dominance. These media innovations are oriented towards the objectives of reactionary politics *à la* Hindutva's cultural activism. At the same time, there are other practices which, although innovative and an exception to the mainstream mass media, in their organisation run contrary to the structural essence of non-dominant communication, that is, they are for the non-dominant and not by them. This is typified by top-down approaches of participation incessantly on the look-out for target groups. (ibid.)

The relevance of Parthasarathi's theoretical essay in this volume will be immediately perceived by many students of various other domains. We would like to refer only to one typical instance of the ambivalent

role of 'alternative' culture, between dominance and resistance, that is, the worldwide acceptance of a cultural object called 'world music'. The concept originated in 1987 when a group of music producers decided to assign this name to a commercial label for a plethora of musical products that would not fit into mainstream genres and styles: Western classical/contemporary, jazz, rock, folk, pop, etc. (Martin 2002: 411). The success of world music in the international market of entertainment sound, video and film products propelled it as an emblem of 'alternative' musical communication, thereby covering not only the eclectic materials it is made of, but also genuine types of production, dissemination and consumption of these items. World music was reappropriated by a broad idealistic young generation who found it appropriate for supporting the ideals of international brotherhood and solidarity across the barriers of space, languages, cultures and politics. Within the dominant music industry, it stands as an undercurrent of resistance to globalization, the response to a shared crave for emotion, popular roots, 'identity' and 'authenticity'—'the dream of a world in which pleasure and the Good would be reconciled, through the charm of rhythms ripened in the sun, in harmony with nature, and safeguarded in the latest technological circuits' (ibid.: 414, 415).

This aspiration for harmony is inseparable from the mist of exoticism haloing World Music, and it prompts us to review its implications. Exoticism, in the first run, designates anything that comes from a foreign place, but it quickly acquires the connotations of strangeness, 'superficial picturesque'... or 'thrill caused by danger'.... According to Tzvetan Todorov, this phenomenon displays three intimately linked dimensions: the valorisation of the other, criticism of the self and the society it belongs to, the fantasy of an ideal based on the image of a romantically constructed other. In brief, exoticism equates 'a praise in misknowledge' [Todorov 1989: 298]. Thus, exoticism amounts to reconstructing the Other so that his/her difference becomes appealing and attractive. To this effect, the difference needs to be worked out, polished, rendered tolerable and consumable. Exoticism consists of making the difference familiar and in the same time preserving a distance that arises interest, titillates imagination and blows off the dream. (Martin 2002: 415–16)<sup>7</sup>

## The Construction of 'Cultural-Political' Objects

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In the classical approach of political science, an existing legal system—or for that matter, any system—would be reduced to a textual, discursive foundation of power relations between citizens, groups and the diverse institutions that constitute a state. But should a legal code be necessarily construed as a rational and externally enforced dispensation or the unstable outcome of negotiated confrontations between a wide range of social partners with different cultural ethos?

In contrast to this static—and, to some extent, essentialist—vision, Karine Bates's essay, 'The Indian Legal System: A Unique Combination of Traditions, Practices and Modern Values', is representative of a fruitful investigation of the 'culture versus power' dialectic. Bates reviews the Indian legal system in its implementation, interpretation and actual practice, with a particular focus on women rights across several historical periods dating back to pre-British India. From this perspective, contradictory and conflictual aspects of the system appear as the outcome of various attempts to 'frame out and supervise society, notably in its dimensions of power' (Martin 2002: 79) that the collective actors—the caste, the village, Moghul and British rulers, etc.—imprinted with their own cultural prejudice and world-views.

From this angle, the formal system of power—the visible part of that iceberg that we named the 'political'<sup>8</sup>—appears as a multilayered sedimentation of 'cultural objects', whereby culture, as a milieu of confrontation, could be equated to connections plus innovation (*ibid.*: 17). Thus, cultural-political 'objects' are the pieces of a landscape whose configuration changes over time and space, as it strongly depends on the location of its observer.

Just as the individual is never simply an individual, because he is always involved with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. (Gadamer 1985: 271)

## Notes

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1. Storey (1993: 6–19) sketches out ‘six definitions which in their different, general way inform the study of popular culture’, an ‘empty conceptual category, one which can be filled in a variety of often conflicting ways depending on the context of use’.
2. Stuart Hall (1981: 231–35) suggests three definitions of popular culture: (a) according to a capitalist common sense, ‘certain things are said to be “popular” because masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them’; the ‘popular’ is here opposed to the ‘culture of the people’, qualitatively constructed as free from manipulation, passivity and vulgarity, the consumers of commercially produced cultural goods being perceived as dupes; (b) a descriptive definition calls popular ‘all those things that the people do or have done’; but ‘the people’ can historically be anybody, and their definition so vague and incoherent as to become irrelevant with regard to the task of an adequate construction of the popular and (c) ‘what is an essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define “popular culture” in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture.’ According to Schwarz (1989: 254–55), we cannot anymore simply describe ‘popular’ in a relation to an antagonism to a high or elite culture, as the formerly determining force of the latter is largely eroded by the great commodification of popular culture. Its place is taken, across classes, by mainstream pop music, TV soaps, blockbuster movies, etc. High culture is no longer able to secure universal respect. The dominant culture is rather an island within commodity culture.
3. John Fiske (1989a: 23, 43–44, 49; 1989b), for instance, defines the category of popular culture in advanced capitalist societies as the culture that ‘is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination.’ It represents ‘the interests of the people’; people being by definition those who do not subscribe to ‘capitalist, consumerist, sexist, racist values’, among whom incorrect values and perverse pleasures may be widely internalized: ‘They are not, however, popular pleasures, but hegemonic ones’; they come from the ruling class. About the return of the repressed in media studies and the critical stand of Hall, see Turner (1990: 68–76, 197–210).
4. A homogeneous model of power at work here opposes the ‘imperializing’ to the ‘localizing’, repression to resistance (Fiske 1993: 204), a model structured with binary antagonisms: bourgeoisie/proletariat, hegemony/resistance, top-down/bottom-up, social disorder/order.
5. According to Bennett et al. (1986: xiii–xiv), both the structuralist and culturalist paradigms in cultural studies do wrongly ‘regard the sphere of cultural and ideological practices as being governed by a dominant ideology, essentially and monolithically bourgeois in its characteristics, which ...

is imposed from without, as an alien force, on the subordinate classes.’ Both approach the cultural field as ‘divided between two opposing cultural and ideological camps—bourgeois and working class—locked in a zero-sum game in which one gains only at the expense of the other, and in which the ultimate objective is the liquidation of one by the other so that the victor might then stand in the place of the vanquished.’

6. Poitevin and Rairkar (1996: 174–81): the cultural traditions specific to subordinate groups in cohesive communities emerge not as passive repetitions of dominant models, but through an active process of reinterpretation and selective acceptance.
7. Original text: *Ce désir d’harmonie est inséparable du halo d’exotisme qui nimbe les «musiques du monde» et invite donc à revenir sur ce qu’il implique. Exotisme désigne à l’origine ce qui vient de l’étranger, mais acquiert rapidement des connotations de bizarrerie, voire de «pittoresque superficiel»... ou de «frisson provoqué par le danger».... Selon Tzvetan Todorov, ce phénomène possède trois dimensions intimement liées: la valorisation de l’autre, la critique de soi et de la société d’appartenance, le fantasme d’un idéal fondé sur l’image d’un autre romantiquement reconstruit; en bref, l’exotisme équivaut à un «éloge dans la méconnaissance» [Todorov 1989: 298]. L’exotisme revient donc à reconstruire l’Autre afin que sa différence devienne séduisante et attirante; pour qu’elle devienne telle, la différence doit être façonnée, polie, rendue tolérable et consommable. L’exotisme consiste à rendre la différence familière, tout en préservant une distance qui suscite l’intérêt, titille l’imagination et fasse s’envoler le rêve.*
8. Refer to the introduction of the first volume in this series: ‘Revisiting “the Political”’. For the foundations of a general theory of the Political, see Balandier (1995).

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# 1

## FROM THE POPULAR TO THE PEOPLE

GUY POITEVIN

The field of ‘popular cultures’ is strewn with confuse and often questionable terminological assumptions. Many studies of ‘popular’ cultures (Dominic 1995) or ‘traditions’ either by insiders or outsiders of the cultures under study, are often—knowingly or unknowingly—loaded with problematic conceptual biases, let alone social, ethnic or political prejudices. The latter may arise from the very motivations of the scholars. Generally, they are to be ascribed to the epistemological assumptions of the socio-cultural environment and socio-political context of the speakers, writers, consumers of cultural goods and social scientists, all of them—though to different degrees—caught up unawares. To what extent can we distance ourselves from such assumptions? The following notes state a few elementary points of semantics regarding terms pertaining or related to the field of popular cultures with a view to suggest a conceptual framework of reference and secure scientific clarity.

Apart from historiographical writing, through larger economies and techniques of writing, the political and cultural elite in Michel de Certeau’s (1975) account have the capacity to manage the intellectual resources of society (Ahearne 1995: 53–59). The way people’s cultural traditions are transcribed, classified and preserved is a case in point. Operations of recording, registering, stocking and standardizing have achieved a dubious hierarchical organization of meaning in modern times. As a rule, the modern imperative to ‘make’ society prompts ‘productive and efficacious modes of rationality to be privileged over

mere representation, superstition or devotion' (Ahearne 1995: 59). This is evidenced by the 'unprecedented dichotomisation of linguistic practices' (ibid.).

A *passive* sector of language shifts in the direction of areas where opinions, ideologies and superstitions will find themselves gathered together, forming a pocket isolated from politics and science (two domains indissolubly united, despite their frictions, through the marriage of rationality and efficiency). From all the outward signs, religious expressions are the most important elements of this inert sector (this place will be filled later by folklore and popular literature). (de Certeau 1975: 170, 185 cited in Ahearne 1995: 59. Emphasis mine)

A group of operative uses of language is differentially set apart from a zone of linguistic passivity, which comprises merely expressive forms, such as folklore and marginal and ordinary cultures, in short, the 'popular'. The latter is counter-distinguished as the 'other'—a kind of residue—in relation to directly productive types of linguistic competence. The popular is construed as a by-product of duly certified mental operations. It cannot, as a result, be apprehended in reference to the effective existence of other people's meaningful practices.

The popular residues are, moreover, assigned the subaltern status of a set of 'fables'. 'The term is of strategic importance. It connotes both fictionality (fables have been set off from authorised regimes of truth) and also orality (they have been set aside by official economies of writing)' (Ahearne 1995: 60). But for all that, modern forms of rationality do not simply forget and leave alone the mass of fables. Scriptural practices of interpretation are designed to extract the important truths from speech, which is believed to implicitly and unknowingly harbour them. 'Fable' is a speech which does not know what it is saying (de Certeau 1984: 160, 233). Competent interpreters with an adequate equipment of correct interpretative keys are needed to make this truth explicit. They establish the legitimacy of their learned exegesis and intellectual control on the unilateral assumption that carriers of popular cultures are incompetent and unable to meaningfully articulate the truth of their speech and practice.

The puzzling and significant fact—to take the example of France—is that studies dedicated to 'popular cultures' became possible from 1852 onwards following a state intervention withdrawing 'subversive'

and 'immoral' popular literature from the people while reserving it to the learned class (and amateurs) for examination and repressive counter-action.<sup>1</sup> This police operation was in the context of the 1848 uprisings and their brutal subjugation:

[I]t constituted the condition for a host of subsequent literary operations which fettrichized a sanitized notion of the 'popular', converting it somewhat perversely into a reassuring object of learned nostalgia. Nisard's purge laid the basis for what Certeau, Julia and Revel call a 'castrating cult' of the people, which they date in this instance of its manifestation around the period 1850–1890. They show how processes of idealization and aestheticization were inseparable from processes of suppression. (Ahearne 1995: 133)

It was at the very moment when chapbooks were being pursued with the utmost vigour that fashionable souls turned their attention with glee to popular books and contents.... The collector's interest was a correlate of the repression used to exorcize the revolutionary danger which, as the days of June 1848 had demonstrated, was still very close, lying dormant. (de Certeau 1993: 51–52)

Therefore, it comes as no surprise if we are used to considering popular cultures as disappearing, and make a point to preserve their embellished ruins. Once popular culture has been exorcized and ceased to be a disquieting world, it can be readily integrated into the national heritage with the 'beauty of a dead'. Cultural assimilation takes place in a reassuring museum (ibid.: 53).

Popular culture is grounded in an operation that human sciences refuse to own up to (Certeau 1990: 45): Politics, right from the beginning of contemporary research, has registered the concept of popular as a matter marked out for repression. We cannot therefore bypass an initial fundamental question: 'While looking for a *popular* literature or culture, scientific curiosity does not know any more that.... it thus seeks not to meet *the people*' (de Certeau 1993: 46. Emphasis mine). Unless we keep to quietly wait for a total revolution to transform the laws of history, how can we now play tricks with the social hierarchic order which organizes the scientific work on popular cultures and repeats itself (de Certeau 1990: 45, 1993: 45–46 )?

Even the most progressive and commendable approaches to popular culture by recent French historians (Bollème 1969; Mandrou 1985; Soriano 1977) and modern interpreters could not, in the opinion of de Certeau, Julia and Revel altogether break away with the effects of

scholarly operations which continue to be carried out upon popular traditions as upon a corpse. By unreflectingly taking over a pre-constituted corpus considered as 'support' or 'reflection' of a 'popular mentality', they fail 'to make a sufficient inquiry into the historical operations which had provided them with their material', and, as a result, they are 'reduplicating the separation between this material and the life of the people it was supposed to represent' (Ahearne 1995: 133). For instance, who wrote such literature? Who was reading it? What about internalized censorship and literary convention?

Among the interpretative operations, the following ones consolidate the construction of the popular as the 'other': the inherited exclusion of disturbing aspects of the popular (violence, sexuality and the threatening alterity of the child) and abstraction from the historical conditions in which popular representations were produced, although 'the links between the texts and a political history are fundamental. They alone can explain how a particular *gaze* was constituted' (de Certeau 1993: 67. *Emphasis mine*). The edifying myths of the 'people' which circulate in a variety of administrative, interpretative and ideological discourses imply an excision of less comfortable or convenient forms of alterity.

Eventually one detects in erudite studies of popular culture an obsession with the question of a lost origin—a quest or a fascination that we have already often seen associated with folklore. 'The fantasmatic presence of a putative origin endows the productions of popular culture in the eyes of learned observers with a distinctive aura' (Ahearne 1995: 134). This aura is ambiguous as it tends to overshadow those elements that would clash with the pure and authentically popular origin as preconceived by the interpreters. What is then its essential function? de Certeau raises the question in the very terms of an historian of popular cultures:

Henri Marrou said that in the last instance, 'the folksong draws its distinctive character from the popular halo which covers it in our eyes'. What is then the meaning of this phantom that designates the origin and at the same time conceals it, this 'halo' that manifests while it 'covers'? (de Certeau 1993: 58–59)

de Certeau, Julia and Revel's answer is that while setting the truth of the people back, as it were, from the actual texts or people, who stand in front of them:

[I]nterpreters sort out the elements of a 'popular culture' with reference to a predefined model of what constitutes the 'authentically' popular. They present this (fictional) model of authenticity in terms of a seductive 'origin' whose traces and aura are supposedly discernible in the texts which they interpret. They are thus able both to mask the nature of their own interpretative intervention and to preserve, despite the inevitably corrupted nature of their documentary evidence, a reassuringly idealized image of the people. They can therefore remain deaf to the questions raised by more unsettling manifestations of popular sensibility. (Ahearne 1995: 135)

Mainly since 1960, a Marxist<sup>2</sup> or 'populist' inspiration has prompted in France the concern for popular culture out of an inverse utopian connection of the elite with the masses. Still, this may not have dictated to the scientific method of operating rules different from those of the past. We may as well prefer to be gullible enough as to fantasize and see popular cultures as an era of tranquillity preceding history, on the skyline of a lost nature or paradise:

The same process of elimination continues. Knowledge remains bound to a power which authorizes it. What matters is therefore not ideologies nor options, but the rapports that a scientific object and methods entertain with the society which allows them. If scientific procedures are not innocent, if their objectives depend upon a political organization, the very discourse of science must confess a function which is allotted to it by a society: hide what it claims to show. This means that an improvement of methods or a reversal of convictions will not change what a scientific operation does with popular culture. A political action is required. (de Certeau 1993: 47–48)

Let us remember three crucial methodological perspectives. First, 'does popular culture exist elsewhere than in the act which deletes it' (ibid.: 70)? The 'popular' seemingly raises interest when its dangers are eliminated or its magnificence is displayed as a dream of wonder in the past, namely, in both cases, once its historical substance has been subdued or converted into something else, by someone else, for something else. 'Popular cultures' come to scientific existence among the elite classes and operate in the modern world in the mode of alienation. Bracketing the fixed sets of representations that figure as 'popular' in the learned discourses of cultural elites, let us focus on the versatile voices and practices of the vast majority of people. While cognitive

strategies tend to convert them into a wishful 'other', manipulate their words into an inert folkloric corpus and turn a cultural elite blind to what it excludes, we have to find our way towards the living consciousness of people themselves.

Second:

Can we think of a novel organization within culture which would not be dependent upon a change in the relations of social forces?

This is precisely what the historian [...] may point out to the literary analysts of culture. His function is to chase the latter out of an alleged status of pure spectators through showing them everywhere the presence of social mechanisms of choice, criticism, repression, through reminding them that it is violence which always gives knowledge its ground. (ibid.: 71)

Third, a countervailing political will should consist in unearthing the nature and means of the active alterity of people's voice and will against the passive otherness in which the 'folklorization of difference' confines them as inert marginal residues (de Certeau 1975: 167). This directs the attention towards people's effective capacity, within their actual historical context, to articulate about themselves representations of their own, invent different practices, and this possibly may trigger transformations in the political and cognitive social orders.

In brief, popular cultures apparently ought first to be the object of social censorship or, on the contrary, of enthusiastic glorification to become the subject matter of a scientific constituency. The 'popular' raises interest when its danger are eliminated or its magnificence, a dream of wonder in the past, namely, in both cases, once its historical substance has been subdued or converted into something else, by some one else, for something else. Popular cultures seemingly come to existence and operate in the contemporary world in the mode of alienation.

We may choose to confine our investigation into traditional peasant communities, Adivasi—indigenous—tribes or social sections which make a point to keep alive customs and rituals inherited from past generations. We may equally prefer to focus on present 'popular' practices emerging in a modern industrial and urbanized context, 'in the very heart of the strongholds of the contemporary economy' and most advanced computer-based technology. Whatever our focus, prior

to setting to observe and report, we have to clear our sight. When we circumscribe an immense sphere of the *popular* as a way of life, a style of thought and speech, a mode of performance, an alternative aesthetic, and so on, in short, an art devised by the common man somehow at variance with the prevailing models, two questions beg our answer. Our response to them pre-empts our search and findings:

They represent anyway the two faces of one and the same political problem. On the one hand: this ‘art’, on what ground do we consider it different? On the other hand, from where (from which distinct position) do we set to analyse it? Possibly, while resorting to the very procedures of this art, shall we come to revise its definition as ‘popular’ as well as our own position of observers. (de Certeau 1990: 44)

Let us still not deceive ourselves, warns de Certeau, and naively expect from our critical political questioning an emancipation of the ‘minority cultures’, a liberated, spontaneous and free emergence of the ‘people’s voice’, as did wish the first folklorists in the context of the German Romantic Movement (1768–1875) (Gibert 1979: 43–55). First, a wish carries no political efficiency. Second, only a political act can question the established patterns of power sharing, lay the foundations of new articulations of science and knowledge, reverse the dynamics of cultural repression and create the conditions of the possibility of a general democratic communication of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> ‘Nevertheless though it gives ground to a new political participation. Another culture will still imply another repression. Language locates itself in this ambiguity, between what it incorporates and what it announces’ (de Certeau 1993: 71–72).

## Oral versus Written: Dichotomy? Antagonism? Mix?

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The identification of ‘highbrow’ or ‘classical’ and ‘normative’ as ‘written’, opposed to ‘popular’ or ‘folk’ and ‘unruly’ as ‘oral’ is a frequent simplistic categorization leading to wrong stereotyped classifications. Highbrow tradition may be orally transmitted and written texts may incorporate and carry large components of popular traditions as well

(for instance, the Puranas in India). The question of elitist domination of one tradition over another one is different from that of their modes of transmission which we may label as a question pertaining to the domain and horizon of ‘mediology’<sup>4</sup> or science of the medium, which appraises the latter’s capability to effectively and adequately transmit messages—whether in writing or by word of mouth.

Nevertheless, elitist traditions have often constructed, maintained and legitimized their ideological dominance through the authority of written texts,<sup>5</sup> for instance, the epics and Puranas in India (Chakrabarti 1996: 55–88). Conversely, a number of oral popular traditions stand as free alternative speech<sup>6</sup> in front of these dominant traditions. Therefore, the assumption of a basic clash between dominant and popular traditions, each of them claiming authenticity and legitimacy with reference to or in account of a particular mode of transmission—respectively in writing and by word of mouth—may often and to a great extent historically prove to be a workable hypothesis.

In the perspective of a cultural-anthropological approach, a few remarks should be stressed regarding the status of the oral and the written as modes of communication:

1. Both of them, the oral and the written, exist by virtue of reciprocal distinctions made within the context of successive and imbricated historical configurations, from which they cannot be isolated. In our present historical configuration orality and writing cannot, therefore, be granted the status of general categories.
2. Moreover one should clear out the mythic dream of a ‘Gaal of orality’ (de Certeau 1990: 195–200): no people’s voice can be retrieved as the carrier of a purely oral alternative culture. People’s voices appear rather as threads deeply woven into the intricate network of writing systems, and now visual systems, all re-articulated in those systems by school and mass media:

We do not believe any more as did Grundtvig (or Michelet) that behind the gates of our cities, in the remote proximity of our countryside, stretch vast poetic and ‘pagan’ grazing lands where would still speak out songs, myths and that proliferating rumor of the *folkelighed*.<sup>7</sup> These voices are only to be heard within the scriptural systems where they stage their entry. They circulate, dance and just call in, in the field of the other.

3. Speech and writing, considered in themselves as practices, techniques or modes of communication, irrespective of historical configurations, are qualitatively different practices which cannot be reconciled or subsumed under a third term, as two species of the same genre, which could be referred to as to their common milieu of origin. No functional homology nor common measure exists between them. Their difference constitutes them as significantly distinct from one another. Their specific mode of operating as medium of communication should be assessed.
4. With regard to cognitive processes, the differential assessment of both the practices cannot remain a purely technical and objective appraisal. For instance, in Western cultural configurations, orality is defined, relative to the definite writing systems as that which stands out as its indefinite residual leftover. Script means linearity, coherence and self-disciplined mental operation. It aims at cognitive construction, cultural production and social dominance. Orality is subordinate, inert, expressively redundant and cognitively opaque.<sup>8</sup>
5. The constitutive distinction that differentiates writing from orality in Western historical configurations consists essentially in referring to a reality (oral popular traditions) from which writing has been distinguished in order to transform it. In the text the world is no more received but fabricated. Writing eventually aims at cognitive and social effectiveness. It plays on exteriority. Script is a laboratory device with a strategic function. Information is received from outside oral traditions which is collected, classified, imbricated in systems of interpretation that are processed on the basis of the letter (written characters; philology eventually supersedes rhetoric). The latter recompose and structure the former. The result is a scriptural product affected by all the marks of the imprint process. These marks show the power of transformation of the writer, a writer bent on 'writing history', that of yesterday as well as that of tomorrow.
6. Written history is constructed as an independent narrative that directs and commands future actions aloof from the past traditions hitherto passively received. Script is a will not to listen any more to what is spoken, but to manage, re-process, redo and conquer. Script is born from a distance put between the spoken words and oneself appearing in a new role, that of an

alien subject prompted by a will to power through accumulation of the past in order to modify it as per one's own models. Re-appropriation, capitalization and conquest are the attributes of the script to the service of states or hegemonic classes.

The relevance and extent of the difference which oppose the spoken oral traditions and their written textual re-fabrication may further be stressed in reference to three typical sets of socio-cultural processes that often support processes of domination (Irigaray 1985). They can be distinctively articulated as follows:

1. First, with regard to the mode of transmission, the written tends to overwrite the oral, the script turns the speech obsolete, the print puts the voice aside, the text obliterates the body, the language makes the gesture redundant. 'This results in putting at a distance the lived body (traditional and individual) and, therefore, also all that in the people remains bound to the soil, to a place, to orality and non-verbal tasks' (de Certeau 1990: 205).
2. Second, with regard to the carriers, the educated agent represses the illiterate vulgar. Learning to write in school is the initiation par excellence into a progressive, capitalist and developing society. The modelling of a modern child is essentially achieved by scriptural proficiency. Literacy increasingly becomes the basic asset of social hierarchy and discrimination and imparts all privileges nowadays to the technocrats as yesterday it did to the 'bourgeois'. Control over language patterns and linguistic material (rhetoric or mathematic) is for the dominant classes the medium of their reproduction and, on the whole, the key to social distinction, authority and power.
3. Third, with regard to the gender parameter, the written remains often a prerogative of the male as one more asset to overpower the female (Irigaray 1985). Accordingly, women's literacy allegedly becomes the key factor of women's uplift and liberation (in the image of men's ascendancy).

Often these three sets jointly operate as united domination patterns under the guise of the superiority of the classical and written—the pure and refined—over the popular and the oral—the crude and rough. Critical queries are particularly relevant here:

1. A first set of questions relates to the clashing claims of authenticity and legitimacy. These claims raise questions of validity: on which grounds does each mode of transmission claim authority over and legitimacy against its counterpart? The concept of authenticity is often put forward as grounds for legitimacy and a claim of validity for a particular cultural statement, a traditional practice, a claim to recognition of ethnic or communitarian identity. In which context and for whom does the notion of authenticity makes sense? How would one define the validity and relevance of this concept?
2. As a matter of fact, the polemic claim of authenticity for popular indigenous traditions against modern, dominant or elaborate traditions is often just a counter-claim against the mythical value that has been given to the practice of writing for the last 400 years:

Progress is of a scriptural kind. To produce text is to produce society as text. Orality is, therefore, defined in many different ways, as what a 'legitimate'—scientific, politic, educational, etc.—practice should distinguish itself from. 'Oral' is what does not work for progress; reciprocally, 'scriptural' is what separates itself from the magic world of voices and tradition. A frontier (and a front line) of Western culture is chalked out with that line of partition. (de Certeau 1990: 198–99)

## The First Decades of Communication through Print

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Empirical observations present the oral and the written not as two separate and opposite extremes, but as the two poles of a magnetic field, the configuration and modalities of which are determined from outside by the system of relations use them as stakes. In a given context and set of circumstances their attributes and functions are determined by the capacity and will of the partners of that system of relations to avail of them to serve their ends. This is clearly illustrated by the study that Natalie Z. Davis made of the consequences of the introduction of print technology on the popular culture of people in the countryside and in the cities during the sixteenth century in France (Davis 1965; Goody 1968).

In the countryside, in 1600, print material had hardly reached villages. The oral culture retained its absolute predominance. It transformed everything that came close to it and kept on transforming itself as per the rules of memory and oblivion, observation and discussion. Some medieval novels may have reached peasants from cities, but they could not have that function of escapism that is observed in the course of the seventeenth century. As in the past, peasants went on strike against paying the tithe in Lyonnais, Ile-de-France and Languedoc; villages in Bourgogne compelled their lords to let free half of the serf population; in Bretagne, Guyenne, Bourgogne, Dauphiné, peasants organized themselves into improvised communes, established contacts and revolt, shouting their traditional slogans, marching with colours flying and chieftains with joyful titles. Nothing of this was either transformed or encouraged by any print. Anyway, those—bishop, lord or king—who wanted to control the countryside and maintain law and order by other means than brutal force ought to send not books, but messengers carrying seals of which nobody can laugh at, and documents to be read loudly out to make their power manifest.

In cities, print materials, first of all the Bible, reached people in the vernacular and common people started writing and publishing. But the reading of a printed book does not smother oral culture. The latter can find in books new topics for conversation. Learning through book does not substitute learning through gesture: it can provide people new ways to refer their *pratique* to a new or traditional authority. Moreover, print does not provide common people with the science of doctors in theology or medicine, or the production of the literati, nor the orders of the powerful. Craftsmen, traders, women too (at least twenty of them became famous) wrote their own books. Peasant sayings, anonymous urban songs and traditions, poems and stories of artisans and of their servants were printed. Groups from the common folk collectively and publicly spoke up through print. Political pamphlets were circulated. Festival brotherhoods (*'abbayes'*, festive societies of crafts and neighbourhoods) printed records of their carnivals where they derisively attack kings, priests and nobility. For the first time, a polemic literature circulated ideas that did not spread from the centre (government, strong movements of opposition like Huguenots or Holy Catholic League), but from the bottom, from urban groups without connection to power. Second, printed pamphlets brought to the common people information on national events which was more

abundant than the usual channels of information (rumour, street songs, private letters, announcements by town criers, ringing of bells, processions of penitents, and so on).

One of the famous Pléiade (leading literary group) poets Jacques Peletier contemplated the design of a right and clear method sufficient to secure a fair quality for vulgar publications through regulating poetry, music, grammar, mathematics, medicine and even spelling. What would happen next when all kinds of people felt like writing their piece of literature—captain, vicar, trader, craftsman—and started publishing their books? But how could the elite rule over aesthetics, scientific or doctrinal truth, if everyone could get their books printed and when vernacular language placed it at the disposal of many and hardly educated sections of the urban population?

With a vernacular Bible, every layman was able to experience that he was entitled to read the Gospel and find his way to salvation under the inspired direction of the Holy Spirit, when for decades doctors in theology, with the strong assistance of secular authorities, were trying to keep for themselves the monopoly of biblical exegesis, denying to ignorants and manual workers in particular the right and capacity to do so. Right intelligence cannot come from a pure and vulgar knowledge of the words, but from the special avocation of those who dedicate themselves to study them, stated a representative of the Catholic establishment. A young Protestant pastor replied that the Pope and doctors in theology prohibit the reading to anyone but themselves, lest they are led to submit their life to the Gospel, give their belongings to the poor and start working with their hands. They, therefore let a poor artisan read sweet love stories and nonsensical books, dance and play cards, but considered him a heretic if he read the Gospel. Still the Lord and the Fathers of the Church told believers to look for and find out the Scriptures, to keep reading them especially before the sermon for them to follow it better. The same pastor stated that sole reading cannot lead to the path of truth. Before coming to censorship and punishment, Protestant orthodoxy demanded from laymen that they place their personal reading under the direction of a duly trained pastor.

As a matter of fact, nothing can prevent laymen from direct access to the Scriptures. Two hundred years ago the monopoly of the clergy was protected by language, Latin and limited technical means. Since the end of the fourteenth century, the vernacular Bible could be found here and there in some lay families. But with the first printing presses, even

before the Reformation, Bibles started circulating in French. No legislation, no inquisition, no censorship, no police force could prevent city people from reading them and freeing themselves from the control of clerics. In 1570 a Catholic French Bible was officially allowed—a revised version of the Geneva Bible—and cheap New Testaments circulated in small format with some success among Catholics. To maintain an orthodox reading of the ‘naked and simple letter’, the text was wrapped with images and religious symbols so that the eye was guided by the commentary and the illustration: the new modes of control had to adjust to the print technologies.

A similar though milder polemic took place in the domain of medical knowledge. A number of books appeared in vulgar language in which doctors of medicine tried to dispel the ignorance that reigned not only among laymen, but also among surgeons—companions (those belonging to a corporation of surgeons). To justify these publications, one of them in 1565 argued that Galien and Avicenna wrote their works in their mother-tongues, evidence similar to the one put forward by Catholic humanists and Protestants who recalled that St Jerome had translated the Bible in a vernacular language. An English author justified medical vulgarization in terms similar to those of Antoine de Marcourt, one of the first Protestants out to stigmatize the ‘merchants’ who appropriated the Faculty of Theology:

*Why do they frown upon Medicine being published in English? Is it their wish that nobody but themselves alone know about it? But what are they achieving with it? Are they traders of our life and death and are we to buy our health from them only at rates that they alone have fixed?*

French Protestant Laurent Joubert explicitly compared doctors in medicine who disapproved of teaching people in their own language how to remain in good health with doctors in theology who deprived people from spiritual food. A surgical operation may succeed in any language and misunderstanding can bear as much on a text in Latin as one in French: should we burn an inexperienced young cleric who misinterprets a Scripture?

The attempts and perspectives of Laurent Joubert who spent twenty-five years of his life to eliminate all misconceptions in medicine are particularly emblematic of the transformations that printing technology effectuated in modes of social relations and cultural traditions.

He decided to publish in 1578 a corrected catalogue of all 'popular mistakes' regarding health. He explained how these mistakes are due to a weakness of the soul and human intelligence, ignorance of oral tradition among midwives in particular, and the conceitedness of those who heard a lot about medicine without understanding much of it. But as in the case of peasant culture, the mistakes of which were revealed to educated literati by printed material, it is similarly the circulation in a print form of ordinary diets, traditional secrets and remedies of all sorts which seemed to have inspired Joubert to realize the concept of popular mistakes as well as brought them to his notice for correction. This exemplifies the deeply paradoxical consequences of printing for the people. On the one hand, it can break the traditional monopolies of knowledge and authority, widely circulate and sell information or works of imagination. It can even establish a new reciprocity in the relation between the author and his anonymous audience. But it also facilitates the setting of new modes of control of popular thoughts. 'How could your servant obey your order and comprehend what you say in an unknown language?' Vulgarizers did not intend to erase the distinction of the ignorant and the knowledgeable, nor to depreciate the medical vocation. They wanted, on the one hand, draw out of their detrimental routine illiterate surgeons—empirical practitioners deprived of science—and, on the other hand, keep them under the control of knowledgeable doctors. They intended to educate people to take better care of their health while concretely persuading them to follow the prescriptions of the doctor to this effect.

In short, these were the first consequences in France of the introduction of printing technique in cities. The cultural life of the common urban people was strengthened: the realism and wealth of their dreams were enhanced; their self-consciousness increased as well as their capacity to be critical of others and of themselves. City people were not passive receivers or beneficiaries, nor passive victims of the new means of communication. They proved to be active users, even interpreters, of books read or heard, sometimes even intervening in their production. When the book reached them, popular and working classes imposed their way of using it. People's oral culture and social organization were strong enough to resist changes and norms brought from the top. Some aspects of Protestantism and Humanism jointly with printing did contribute to shaking the existing hierarchical orders

and delay the fixations of new values. The economic control of publishing companies was not in the hand of big bookshop owners or traders. Knowledge monopolies were broken and not replaced by effective political or religious censorship, nor any theoretical or legal systems of private ownership of ideas.

## Popular versus Classical

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Common sense and common parlance easily oppose ‘popular culture’ to ‘elitist culture’ as the untrimmed to the elaborate, the instinctive to the restrained, the unpolished to the sophisticated, the ephemeral to the permanent, the spontaneous to the civilized, the unbound to the regulated, and so on. These dichotomies are arbitrary and misleading denominations (Bakhtin 1970; Banerjee 1989).

They are unilateral classificatory categories coined from outside by circles that identify themselves through force as elite over the ‘others’ simply by discriminating on their own authority upon what they consider as not belonging to their fold. They secure legitimacy for their statement by an effect of discourse that makes sense for both parties with reference to a hierarchical framework which is taken for granted. These circles differentiate themselves ‘from’ by discriminating themselves ‘against’ the rest of the others. The distinction rests upon a value judgement enforced for reasons of social cultural dominance. There is no denying the fact that ‘since the origins of contemporary research, politics has inscribed the concept of the *popular* within a problematic of repression’ (de Certeau 1990: vii, 31–49, 195–224, 1993: 45–72, 141–64, 165–91, 204–22). It does not result from scientific or epistemological considerations. If the latter happen to be brought forward, it is out of need of a *post factum* legitimacy, as a cover-up for a will of socio-cultural hegemony and not on account of insight of the specificity or merits of various modalities of cultural creativity.

Through opening up a rift and a distance between two allegedly clear-cut worlds of unequal standards of cultural creations, the opposition of popular to classical is to be construed as a social event through which the representatives of ‘the classical’ advocate and appropriate for themselves a right of control in cultural matters. Culture appears as

a discursive asset drawn into contests for ascendancy between closely related groups. It becomes a stake through which social categories and groups compete for positions of supremacy. Culture here does not figure substantively, as an autonomous symbolic world independent from a socio-political context.

No wonder then if those representing 'the popular' do in return counter that supremacy and try to subvert it on the basis of innate potentialities and rights to be recognized to the 'popular culture'.<sup>9</sup> It is then forcefully vindicated and owned as the culture of the proletariat, and for this reason seen as incorporating an in-built spirit of resistance and social transformation. 'Popular culture' stands as antagonistic discursive component in a conflictual process where counter-culture carries the assertive will of subaltern.

The dichotomy of 'classical' versus 'popular' is ideological. It logically leads to dead ends with regards to attempts of insight of the specific nature of the 'popular' as specific creative process of expression and communication.

The following dead ends pre-empt scientific cognitive operations. Once the popular has been isolated as an entity *per se*, some like to glorify it as a potent patrimony, which though doomed to die under the spell of modernity—or precisely because of this onslaught to come—shines as a venerable memorial to be revisited with emotion. The category of 'folk' may sometimes carry this association of respect for obsolete traditions (rituals, dramatic forms, aesthetic objects, myths, beliefs and practices particular to a community considered as 'primitive', 'ethnic' or 'exotic') with a condescending regret for their inanity. As a consequence, 'folk' and 'ethnic' objects become fit for entertainment and trade usages meeting a great variety of needs.

Others would still like to draw upon popular potentialities as an asset against the forces of decay of the present age, or even use them as stakes for counter-cultural (anti-modern) reconstruction: post-modernity may advocate them as opportunities of the survival for humankind. Many are satisfied with at least archiving and preserving a patrimony for the curiosity and knowledge of future generations. On the contrary, others would simply forget, purposively discard or look down upon a continent of irrationality replete with lack of scientific outlook, superstitious beliefs and magic rituals, doomed anyway to disappear sooner or later.

On the whole, in modern discourses, popular cultural forms are often simply equated with 'primitive', 'archaic', 'esoteric' or 'traditional' forms, whether positively or negatively assessed. Two erroneous principles operate behind these classificatory approaches. The assumption of a non-commensurability or substantive estrangement of both the so-called popular and elitist cultures, first, implies an essentialist concept of culture. Second, on this basis, one constructs one's cultural identity through opposition to the 'other'.

For the 'learned' and 'knowledgeable' elite who claim competence and authority to reflexively ponder over cultural matters and the progress of humankind with full knowledge of the facts, popular culture on the whole pertains to the pre-human realm of the primitive, the irrational and the esoteric. Conversely, for those who feel discriminated upon, 'colonized' and exploited by the very same elite, it becomes the repository of human hopes of dignity and alternative social orders.

As a matter of fact, both the essentialist and differentialist principles have strong historical credentials. They are deeply grounded in the initial construction of cultural anthropology as human science (Affergan 1987) by the erstwhile colonialist authorities.

## Culture as a Milieu of Circulation

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Opposing approaches are simply mistaken. Let us start from the most common and everyday observation, that there is no such stable object as 'given cultures' except for analytical purposes. One may even deny the status of an 'existing reality' to culture for the reason that what we observe is a permanent osmosis (Muchembled 1991) or communication of idioms, a constant circulation of aesthetic creations, a mix of forms of life, processes of hybridization and cross-fertilization, blending and overlapping of tastes and cognitive patterns, the capacity to freely incorporate or reinterpret, flexibility to integrate, readiness to share viewpoints. Innovation constantly takes place through collages and patchworks, re-configuration and distortion, overlapping of forms or texts and commercial labelling, syncretism and cross-fertilization, and so on.

In this respect, culture and communication are reciprocal concepts, which some would even equate to one another (Carey 1992).

Michel Serres (1968: 11–20) conceives of communication as a network or web of which one has, at will, enlarged the internal differentiation, or as the image of a diagram constructed as irregularly as possible. Such images forbid any linear and univocal flow of information and agency. They point to a great number of possible mediations, the consequent plurivocity of kinds of relations and the multi-linearity of the ways to cultural inventiveness. Culture can be conceived in terms of multiple determinations only. Such a complex interactive milieu should nevertheless not be construed after the image of a vast ‘cultural orchestra with no conductor or score’ (Winkin 1981: 106), in which each player spontaneously adjusts to other players as per the rules of a general musical composition understood as a systemic set of rules of harmony ‘similar to linguistic codes’. Culture ought to be studied as communication, provided semiotics is not made a substitute to cultural anthropology, and entrusted with the study of all modalities of patterned communication (Eco 1976: 22). Communication as cultural process is a concept altogether different from communication as pattern of interaction or system of symbolic exchange.

The new technologies of communication (transport, trade, information) have not created these processes, they just give them tremendous chances. Through facilitating exchange, they give wide opportunities to cultural creativity. Culture is more a process of emergence through interaction than a symbolic product. Let us outline the sphere of the cultural under the horizon of culture conceived as an inalienable capability of semantic reappropriation and practical challenge of given or normative idioms. This capability expresses itself in various processes of reinterpretation.

The theory of inter-textual polyvalence first articulated by the Russian Mikhaïl Bakhtin with regard to the study of literary works and followed by his Bulgarian disciple Julia Kristeva and the latter’s compatriot Tzvetan Todorov, rests upon a dialogic approach, according to which a literary text is ‘first of all a polyphony of voices within the very text itself’ (Dosse 1992: 72–74, 104, 377–78, 380, 427, 517). What becomes essential is the dialogue of literary texts between themselves: they are filled with previous texts with which they play. As a result, the initial structure is removed off the centre. The critical study of a text opens onto the historical context against which it stands. The principle of the closure of the text in itself is disputed. Furthermore, T. Todorov

and others with the notion of trans-textuality will stress another polyphony upon which rests the interpretation, the one that takes place between the voices of the author, the reader and the literary analyst, each of them operating as a confrontation of texts with personal questions, emotions and drives within a distinct historical context.

Culture as human agency cannot but be a process more than a substance. We consider culture as human attribute comprises three constitutive components:

1. a practice, whether cognitive, assertive or pragmatic;
2. an agency or a creation, resulting in a transformation; and
3. a meaning, a purpose or intent.

Though any human agency may be cultural, that activity is not necessarily cultural nor inevitably recognized as such. For culture to really exist, it is not sufficient to be the author of social practices; those social practices ought to have a signification for the one who performs them. It is a signifying practice. It consists not in receiving but in performing the act by which each one puts his or her mark upon what others give him or her to live and think.

Any culture requires an action, a mode of appropriation and owning up; a personal transformation, an exchange within a social group. Culture is a labour to be undertaken over the whole breadth of the social life (de Certeau 1990: 121, 123, iii–iv). Culture as action is an intervention binding the agents to determined objectives and targets through bringing into play definite means and ways. It differs from ‘cultural development’, which envisages a homogeneous growth within an ideology of continuity and invariability of the established socio-cultural systems of reference.<sup>10</sup> Our perspective should be one of *cultural dynamics*:

It is the action through which a human group, becoming aware of himself, makes use of the techniques and knowledge which he has or receives from other groups, creates new works, new practices, and thus contributes to escape a process of reproduction of society or of transformation solely controlled by the material conditioning and the play of productive forces. (Chombart de Lauwe 1994: 22)

We may accordingly consider that the mistaken confrontational approaches are grounded in *inadequate static semantics* that usually define culture defined as (de Certeau 1990: 167–68):

1. values and models established as normative by a particular social section out of a will to power over the whole social fabric;
2. a patrimony of selected tangible works or immaterial productions to be preserved against the damages of time and circulated as a treasure;
3. a world-view—images, symbolic forms, cognitive frameworks—particular to a given population or community;
4. patterns constructed by cultural anthropologists in reference to behavioural, institutional, ideological or mythical systems of reference, which globally differentiate one society from another one; and
5. symbolic systems of communication and their media.

There can, therefore, be no substantive definition of popular culture.

Popular culture (Biggsby 1976; Mukerji and Schudson 1991) may be better construed as a field of conflicting claims, an area of social assets available to competing<sup>11</sup> social agencies, a set of predicates for ideological constructions:

[...] an arena in which the systems of signification and understanding are closely intermingled. In this arena, domination is the very stake; nevertheless, on account of the aesthetic qualities, the performative character and the highly symbolic forms specific to the popular cultures, the practices which can be displayed are of a particular nature. They use to be diverted, allusive, metaphorical (except when we are in front of 'committed' artists).... They construct and transmit representations of social realities ... through symbolic, polysemic languages the power of which essentially depends upon their capacity to rouse emotion. (Jules-Rosette and Martin 1997: 25–26)

The processes of permanently interactive communication of idioms are to be understood synchronically and diachronically. They may justify the empirical concept of popular culture suggested by Jules-Rosette and Martin (ibid.: 11–13) as *the globality of the symbolic systems which make sense for all the population of a given area*, whatever be the particular re-interpretations, selective or antagonistic components (what is sometimes referred to as 'sub-cultures', 'counter-cultures' or differentiated as 'great' and 'little' traditions, seemingly other words for 'classical' and 'popular'): 'One may possibly suggest that by "popular" one may understand, within a universe circumscribed by

analytical needs, the zone where overlap the greatest number of systems of meaning and where their imbrication is the most pregnant.'

This designation or representation of culture as a set of overlapping constituent symbolic forms is consonant with the dynamic concept of culture suggested by Michel Serres (1975) as a knot of connections woven by history, with the specificity of cultures actually resting upon the particular historical profile of these interrelations along a given span of time:

The cultural space in which a group stays, works, lives and reasons or speaks, is the space of the isomorphes. The set of reliable relations binding together the operations and elements of each one of the spaces recognized as different. The group does not inhabit its history, or its religion, or its myths, or its science, or its technology, or its familial structure, it nests in the bridges through which these islands communicate. Culture, its culture, is no more a space or qualified spaces, but, precisely, that very space of isomorphes between the said various spaces. (ibid.: 102)

Such a representation of culture as an *isomorphic milieu of reciprocal transformations* leads Denis-Constant Martin on the basis of his studies on music and festivals to conceive of the following model for the development of popular culture:

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> Circulation > exchange > syncretism > innovation > circulation >

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Source: Jules-Rosette and Martin (1997: 11–13).

In the perspective of such constant osmosis, a central question according to him is that of *the processes of production and consumption*, of which Table 1.1 gives a summary. The various possibilities of combinations shows immediately that popular culture refers to a 'field of exchange' filled with all sorts of objects now labelled as 'cultural commodities'. Culture becomes an attribute of the category of 'trade'.

In short, given a particular zone or domain of observation, two related perspectives are to be discarded as inadequate: their static dichotomy as well as their syncretic amalgam, once we relate the opposite terms (popular and elitist) as the extreme ends of *a continuum*. Culture is circulation from one place and from one sphere in both directions with no solution of continuity or visible frontier differentiating, at a

**Table 1.1**  
**Processes of Production and Consumption**

|                        | <i>Consumed by people</i>                                     | <i>Not consumed by people</i>                                                                                 |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Produced by people     | People's theatre, painting, dance, music                      | Touristic art, dance, music, theatre taken up by media; state, cultural industries, rap in the USA and Europe |
| Not produced by people | Negritude, ethnic authenticity, elitist discourses on culture | Great traditional art of experts, priests, artisan castes, professionals                                      |

*Source:* Jules-Rosette and Martin (1997).

specific point in time or space, one from the other. There is an unbreakable idiomatic continuum and this continuum is no static mixture of elements but permanent *cross-fertilization in time and space*.

By temporal and spatial continuum I do not mean identity. I mean to say that despite mutual ideological discrimination and denials, no classical culture exists apart from the so-called popular culture, and no popular culture can stand aloof and immune from the elitist one. Both are bound to exist through interaction with one another as the two poles of a magnetic field. The focus should, therefore, be on the modalities of this interaction within a given context.

## **Dominance versus Interaction**

One cannot overlook the fact that highbrow and popular traditions share many elements. They speak the same idiom. This is precisely what explains their conflict as they confront each other on similar grounds. Two absolutely heterogeneous cultural configurations would not be in a position to interfere or be in conflict for the lack of a common idiom. In a given constellation, popular and elitist traditions are neither absolutely similar nor absolutely opposite entities. Their relation is polemical. Their clash occurs as *a conflict of interpretation*, whatever be its substantive object—whether a common patrimony or the immediate reality. The concept of culture makes sense as a chapter of the scientific constituency of conflict as it refers to 'strategies' seeking 'differentiation' and identity through antagonistic rhetorical

or practical moves. In this perspective, no more than the oral or the written, the concept of culture can hardly be considered as a general category per se.

As a matter of fact, such a conflict may not necessarily propound mutually exclusive discourses. It may be construed as *an interactive meet under different figures*. For instance, the specific relevance of processes of exchange, co-optation, assimilation, reappropriation, and so on of cultural forms needs to be recognized and given as much importance as processes of autonomous differentiation through counter-culture and rejection.

Consequently, the same following questions need to be raised in each case and *for each figure of interaction*: how and why do the various levels—from the classical to the popular—and the different forms of transmission—through the spoken and the written word—interfere with one another and possibly borrow from and/or reject one another at any given period of time? In no society can we find the literati totally isolated from the common man or the classical forms alien to folk forms; nor can observe popular traditions keeping themselves completely aloof and unaffected by those forms considered as classical or normative. Communication of the idioms is the rule though with highly significant differences in modality. We have, therefore, to answer questions such as the following:

1. What are the immediate contexts, extent, modes of production and the motives of those significant differences of idioms? This question relates to the place and intentionality of the cultural assertion.
2. Can we define a cognitive model to account for the reciprocity and the discrepancy at the same time of a variety of figures? This question pertains to the domain of cultural anthropology.
3. Of what nature is the conflict and what are the stakes of the latter in a given period? This question relates to drives for hegemony crossing through the wide historical socio-cultural constellation.

In this respect, to take one contemporary example, processes of cultural domination have taken new dimensions today with the tremendous industrial development of the mass media, in front of which

the former power and authority of written texts tends to fade out. The result is that the challenge nowadays lies less in the communication media as such, than in their relationship with systems of socio-economic and socio-cultural power. Symbolic systems and their representations become an industrial asset and fall under the usual regulations of an allegedly 'liberal' market economy.

In short, the multiplicity of processes of semantic restructuring at the ideological level on the one hand, and the pressures of changing socio-cultural environments on the other, are such that no tradition, whether written or oral, whether elitist or popular, remains simply identical over a period of time. No tradition worth the name is static, nor is passed on from one generation to the next one as a pure repetition. Generations follow one another, but rarely simply copy one another. From where and how do they inaugurate the difference?

A final question to be raised in this context is, therefore, whether, and if so how, does a tradition—highbrow or popular—remain faithful to itself while transforming itself, progressing and evolving along the flow of history and under the pressure of inescapable pressures—unless it simply gives up its identity and disappears as a specific cultural entity. When processes of transformation and inter-breeding are intensely activated, the questions projected to the forefront are those of continuity down the ages, heritage to be preserved as a live asset, self-identification sought against a variety of competing traditions and maintenance of identity in the middle of sweeping socio-cultural, historical or technological transformations.

## Cultures as Strategies of Identity

The relevance of culture for a given group consists in its function as effective strategy of collective identity versus other groups or categories. This identity should, therefore, not be understood after a static proclamation of patterns of beliefs, norms or codes inherited and faithfully kept. Such a repetitive assertion would sound the death knell of that culture, reducing it to the state of a fossil and signalling the historical irrelevance of its carriers.

A given culture may first appear and be projected as a set of structures of signification and understanding shared by the members of a

group and operating at various levels of their everyday life through emblems, symbols, narratives, images, tunes, festivals, records and memories, rituals, and so on, owned and vindicated as one's own particular property. These sets are symbolic. They transmit correlated systems of meaning. But these systems are always temporary memoranda of (self and mutual) understanding negotiated and conspicuously carried by a community to know itself by concomitantly differentiating and discriminating itself from others. This means that two drives are constitutive of collective identities in a given socio-cultural constellation: negotiation and heterogeneity.

Denis-Constant Martin finds an extraordinary example of this in the New Year festivals celebrated at Cape in South Africa by the 'coloureds' experiencing the regime of apartheid:

**The Carnival** (Le Roy Ladurie 1979; Pereira de Queiroz 1992) is a particularly fascinating event in this respect because it allows everybody to be simultaneously oneself and another, as it prompts towards changes and confusions of roles. The performances presented during these feasts [...] outline the paradoxical limits of a culture of heterogeneity in which indigenous innovations and innumerable references to external worlds (Europe, America and Asia) appear side by side [...] One observes there how hardly transformed 'alien' cultural components can be merged into different versions, possibly contrary to one another, of the identity discourse of a group [...]

Identity discourses are virtual discourses conjugated in the future tense. They look like exhortations to act, they are rather still no less claims and wishes<sup>12</sup> [...] Once isolated from their native social and cultural context, these discourses find themselves distorted or can even serve commercial purposes. This is the way the 'African Art' and 'The World Music' have been invented. As a consequence, distortion, politicization, vindication and re-appropriation of identity discourses may take place at various moments in the circuit from production to consumption and, instead of transfers, a re-labelling of forms of popular culture takes place. The Pygmies of Ituri forest once transported on the stage of the Casino theatre in Paris, did not present a form of popular or for that matter traditional art, but some hybrid thing which could be classified as 'exotic neo-primitivism' [...] The same thing happened with the popular art from Zaïre which was baptized 'crude art' or 'naïve art' for reasons of export. In such cases, commercial categories supersede those originating from the processes of production of popular art and totally erase the complex

processes and the reality of the places where it develops. (Jules-Rosette and Martin 1997: 30–33)

In this context, it is moreover difficult to simply equate popular culture with revolt against and subversion of dominant cultures. People's culture may overtly or covertly do so and in various forms testify to the dominance to which people are subject. But this does not necessarily mean a clear denunciation or resistance (Scott 1990). Ambivalences and contradictions are rather characteristic features of popular cultures in this regard. Besides utopias of instant reversal or transcendent judgement, painful surrender and expression of suffering, irony and laugh, attraction for dominant figures and bonds of dependent loyalty, passive expectation of generosity, and so on, may ambiguously go along with hidden wishes of revolt. The internalization of patterns of oppression is not exclusive of emotional verbal outbreaks and flights of liberated imagination.

Four general types of 'political shaping' are tentatively envisaged by Jules-Rosette and Martin (1997: 26–27, 34–38) to account for the different ways in which the bonded consumers of a culture of dominance may have to 'politically' express their dissatisfaction and opposition to cultural productions perceived as oppressive:

1. Reappropriation and re-investment of internalized dominant patterns with new meanings by subaltern groups, within limited margins of freedom of expression and only in dreams or at the level of discourse and with no impact on the actual historical context of repression.<sup>13</sup>
2. The New Year festival observed by Denis-Constant Martin in Cape Town, South Africa (see contribution in this volume), insists on one's singular collective identity and on the strategies of preservation of one's social and cultural autonomy. The political power is a factor clearly spotted; still, it can be modified, and strategies are devised to bypass, avoid or put up with it.
3. Popular feasts particular to the subordinated are manipulated, transformed, revitalized, invented even (for instance, in the nineteenth century in France, see Corbin et al. 1994), in the name of national or regional identity, to curb antagonisms and project a façade of harmony. The diversity remains dangerously alive as a splinter in the social body.

4. Popular symbols or feasts openly fuel revolt and may prompt sudden emotional outbreaks (Bercé 1994).

An analysis carried out in 1974 of the language of oppressed Brazilian peasants from the state of Pernambuco shows that their discourse was dividing the social space into two parts with the construction of two stratified levels (de Certeau 1990: 32–33). There was first the antagonistic socio-economic level of hostility and resistance structured by an immemorial struggle between the ‘powerful’ and the ‘poor’, a field of permanent victory of the rich and the police, and the realm of lies in the sense that the powerful not only triumph, but cheat the poor with deceptive statements—‘People do know but they cannot speak loudly out,’ say the peasant. The oppressed are perceptive enough to detect the conflictual networks below the semantic cover of language (Poitevin 2000). The second level was opening up a realm of utopia where a miraculous alternative asserted itself in a religious language in terms of heroic deeds of a liberator striking people’s enemies with heavenly punishments.

## Performance versus Competence

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I suggest a concept of popular cultures as performances. I borrow this concept from linguistic models on account of the distinctive dimension of spontaneity or inventiveness that singles out popular cultural events. The ways, modes and forms of processes of popular practices homologically point towards that unassuming modest gap or difference ‘in the margins of the legal texts’, which according to linguistic theories distinguishes enunciation as performance from language as competence (de Certeau 1990: 36, 56).

The act of speech, with all its procedures, tactics and skill, is not reducible to the knowledge of the language system, nor the content of what is stated or embedded in given idioms. To speak up is a productive or creative act with four specific characteristics.

The enunciation (Benveniste 1966: 251–66) as a performance is:

1. a realization or an effectuation of the linguistic system: it exists in reality only through an act of speech in the field of language

- as a system, this system being its support and condition of possibility;
2. an appropriation or re-interpretation of language: an operation upon the latter by the speaker who makes its own use of the supportive language system and its given idioms;
  3. an allocution: the constitution of a relation with the one who is addressed; and
  4. the institution of a present by a subject who says 'I'.

## A Dialectical Methodology

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The difficulty of identifying 'change' from the actors' perspective points at a cognitive 'dialectical' methodology in which models are constructed and evaluated with the participation of informants. This goes beyond the usual opposition between 'objectivity' (focussing on the sole data and ignoring the observer as if the data itself did not exist) only through the presence of the observer and 'subjectivity' (putting the observer, an alien human being, in the central place). Analysts contribute to the information process, introducing their 'folk views' at the same level as informants.

In our experience, the dialectical approach has been effective when it has involved various analysts with diverse degrees of acquaintance with the culture under investigation. In this set-up each participant is, to some degree, both an informant and an analyst, 'a community of inquiry within a community of practice', to quote Aygyris.

At the extreme end of the scale this comprises 'mechanical analysts' (computer programmes) with no initial competence and high performance skills. At the other end, knowledge holders may turn to analysts if motivated by a model construction that does not remain an academic exercise. Models of this kind are therefore goal-oriented. They are expected to induce social or cultural change, in a very broad sense, rather than to stand as objects of contemplation. Their evaluation, in this context, is that of their ability to achieve the results for which their elaboration has been undertaken.

In the process of cognitive modelling—a trade-off between generality, accuracy and relevance—the dialectical approach gives more importance to descriptive aspects, accuracy and relevance, to the detriment of generality, which provides models with predictive abilities.

Computer documentary and inference techniques may play an important role in readjusting this trade-off.

## Notes

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1. In 1852 France, following the defeat of the socialist and republican movements of February and June 1848, and after the *Restauration* of the Empire, a decree of the Minister for General Police, Charles de Maupas, prohibited chapbooks and ordered their confiscation. This gave the newly appointed deputy secretary to the said Minister, the enthusiastic and grateful Charles Nisard, the opportunity to 'collect these booklets and study them with the most scrupulous zeal' in order to properly counter the 'disastrous influence that exerted over all the minds a number of bad books that hawking circulated almost without obstacle all over France' (Nisard 1864).
2. This should not make us forget that under the Stalinist regime, people from Ukrainia, for instance, were severely prohibited from singing their traditional songs. Were they caught or denounced to the state authorities, party officials or KGB, they were harassed, jailed or sent to *gulags* in Siberia for a crime of illicit nationalism against the Soviet Empire. Still, mothers in hushed voices continued teaching their daughters a patrimony which was then secretly recorded by Catherine Azad and Frédéric Gonseth. See their chattering documentary film *L'Ukraine à Petits Pas*, 1992, Télévision Suisse Romande, and their several recordings on CDs titled *Ukrainian Voices*.
3. Michel Authier and Pierre Lévy (1996) draw the theoretical and experimental outlines of such a democratic sharing outside the settings of academic systems.
4. Debray (1991, 1997) deals with 'mediology' as science of the transmission processes and modalities.
5. See Goody (1977, 1986, 1994). The author deals with the difference that writing brings about with regard to the social organization of societies in comparison with societies that know only oral traditions, and with the transition from oral regime to the 'script economy' as support of institutions and symbolic structures of control and dominance.
6. Orality has often been referred to as privileged stake and milieu of spontaneity and autonomy vis-à-vis written dominant traditions. See Iyengar (1983), Poitevin and Rairkar (1996), Richman (1992) and Singh (1993).
7. This word cannot be translated because its French equivalent, 'popularity', has already been devalued by the use that we made of it, though it is in relation to 'people' the analogous of 'nationality' to 'nation'.
8. See Vernant (1988: 196–200). The passage from speech (*parole*) to writing (*écriture*) had far-reaching impacts on cognitive processes.
9. Among recent works of social scientists, one comes across two general tendencies about the concept of popular culture: for some, 'popular' refers to

all the individuals inhabiting a given geographical or administrative area; for others, the word 'people' refers to such social strata as the workers, the peasant, the repressed classes. With the term 'subaltern studies', several Indian historians would locate themselves in this tendency. See Jules-Rosette and Martin (1997: 10–11), with references to Grignon (1991), and Mukerji and Schudson (1991).

10. The concept of development as such makes sense only with reference to organic processes where a living being evolves gradually by a natural process, unfolds its potentialities, opens out, expands, brings progressively innate capabilities to a fuller, greater or better state. In biology 'develop' means to (a) progress from earlier to later stages of individual maturation and (b) 'progress from earlier to later or from simpler to more complex stages of evolution. (French *Développeur*, from Old French *developper*: *des-*, from Latin *dis-* [reversal] + *voloper*, to wrap up, perhaps from Celtic *vol-* [unattested], to roll, [indo-european *wel-*3, to turn, roll with derivatives referring to curved, enclosing objects])' (Morris 1980). Development is, therefore, a change happening essentially on the strength of genetic programming or, once we extrapolate to non-organic domains, in conformity with predetermined patterns. There cannot be development but as expansion of originally given seminal forms. Development is thus antithetic to transformation, in particular to any concept of and will to social restructuring which places the human free will at the origin of any social order and denies any predetermined or given programme. The terms of cultural, social or economic development make sense only with reference to essentialist or dogmatic predefinitions of *what is* culture, society or economy, and accordingly to *what should be* cultural, social or economic promotion.
11. No wonder then that empirical cultural studies do often record testimonies of the 'common man'—particularly common women, for that matter—in which the subordinate understand by culture nothing else than instruments of domination and repression. See Poitevin (1992) and Verhelst (1994: 10).
12. The author refers in this respect to Austin (1962: 148–49) and Greimas (1979: 179–80).
13. The author quotes as typical example the reappropriation of the epic figure of Sita in the tradition of the grindmill songs in Poitevin and Rairkar (1996).

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# 2

## INTERVENTIONIST TENDENCIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

VIBODH PARTHASARATHI

What is evident to any traveller in India is that the ‘democratic’ state, the ‘free’ market and the ‘nationalist’ Hindu right are today the dominant fulcrums of cultural production. In doing so, they have drawn on elements of popular culture—be they cultural practices predating the modern mass media, or those created and shaped by the latter. Moreover, they have harnessed the most significant techno-organizational elements of contemporary media industry towards proliferating the production and circulation of their culture-ware.

### Prevailing Fulcrums of Culture

What is, however, not evident is that all three are involved in a rigorous exercise of codifying elements of popular culture. While looking at instances of these, it is important to take note of how each has drawn from the experience of the other. In general, corporate advertising often creates a series of messages from self-referential popular ‘text’. The television ad campaign of the global giant Coke employs a range of de-contextualized images of what is apparently ‘cricket culture’ towards positioning its brand in India. Together with sponsoring key events, Coke’s imagery seeks a fundamental change in perception—from

being a drink to a symbol associated with cricket all over the country. Interestingly, in terms of representation, both its narrative and ideology, this series of TV advertisement echoes the 'Mera Bharat Mahaan' (My Great Bharat) series initiated by Doordarshan a few years ago. To construct a harmonious 'national culture', it uses snippets of music and dance from various parts of the country, thereby reaffirming the discourse of 'unity in diversity'. Ostensibly rivalling such dominant *videshi* (metropolitan) and *swadeshi* (indigenous) modes of national culture, stands the Hindu right, whose culture-ware is today as equally visible as that of the state and the market. Through posters, graffiti, pictures or stickers of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's saffron flag along with (proposed) temple at Faizabad, it has given traditional icons a contemporary political context and ideological direction, ensuring that a single message is read from such individual texts (Basu et al. 1993: 61). Very much like corporate brand promotion, images of *Om* have been usurped by Hindutva's (Hindu right-wing nationalist groups) symbolism and projected in the public (such as on car stickers) as an assertive indication of the 'new' Hindu identity. Detailed analyses have revealed that structures of dominance are reproduced as much through media representation as within the mode of communication associated with the Hindu right (Babb and Wadley 1997).

In ways very similar to the manner in which Rajiv Gandhi was 'made' by the state television, Sadhvi Rithambara was 'made' by audio tapes 'marketed' through non-state media. A close look at the 1980s indicates that the Hindu right's use of the audio-visual medium is neither sporadic nor at a larger level unprecedented. In harnessing the audio-visual media, the Hindu right reaped the benefits of what Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran (MGR), NTR (N.T. Rama Rao) and Rajiv Gandhi had sowed with the help of popular cinema, mobile video vans and television respectively. However, the forces of Hindutva have demonstrated the unique, and rather discomfiting, synergy between a reactionary 'church' and the modern electronic church. At the same time, its use of media forms predating the mass media (puppetry, theatre, music and so on) has striking parallels with the way in which they were adopted by the state to promote the discourse of Green Revolution in the 1960s and the ideology of family planning in the 1970s.

Not surprisingly, in a decade-old trend, fundamentalist forces (the political right) have transformed, re-contextualized objects of worship and mythological tales rooted in popular culture into symbols of political conflict and sociological documents respectively. I say 'not surprisingly' because the media culture industry (the economic right) has always drawn on elements of popular culture, projecting them as a de-contextualized and de-politicizing 'culture-ware'—be they are brand names in television soaps or in advertisements.

Quite obviously, promoting popular culture was never the primary objective in all three instances. What these forces sought was to employ expressions from the 'popular' towards attaining their underlying ideological and material objectives. In other words, in each case hegemony has been to a large extent achieved through an instrumental use of popular culture in their media campaigns and political discourse. Thus, what we have witnessed is that the three most dominant forces in the country are instrumentally employing elements of the 'popular', redefining their meaning and relocating their contexts to suit their own discursive practices. While some of these may represent popular aspirations and others merely populism, commonality lies in each of them projecting a history and a world-view. In their articulations of popular culture, these three forces may either find themselves in conflict, symbiotically overlapping or operating in distinct social terrains.

Nevertheless, all three have integrated various means of communication and cultural practices towards furthering their political agenda. Their mode of communication is characterized by a purely instrumental use of the media; encouragement of de-contextualized presentation of image, sound and text; disregard for critique from within; monopoly over cultural production; homogenizing and universalizing the essence of their specific cultural products and an active reproduction of structures of dominance as much through their media practice as within their own mode of communication. The modes of organization of such dominant cultural processes provide the institutional base for the creation of a 'new' individual and a collective self in accordance with the respective logic of the state, the market and the Hindu right. At the same time, their cultural production sets the political context within which other cultural practices are taking shape.

Does the context thus sketched out provide space for initiatives to foster a critical cultural practice?

## Culture: Between Dominance and Resistance

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Contemporary economic organization has institutionalized communication processes and cultural practices along industrial lines, giving birth to the culture industry. Leading the universalizing zeal of the culture industry is the mass media: the epitome of dominant communication today. While a few continue to believe that ‘mass’ signifies a large diverse audience whose members are physically separated from each other (Trenholm 1995: 276), it is more likely that the term indicates the economic organization and institutionalized structure of cultural practice.<sup>1</sup> The mass media is increasingly becoming a zero-sum game in which media moghuls seem to be consolidating, while the rest get eroded. The social relations regulating the contemporary mode of dominant communication have led to the isolation of the individual in two ways: through inequities within the production and distribution of culture, and through the fragmented nature of information (images, text, music) churned out by it. Although the mass media is increasingly influencing conflict and status quo, as also the formation and erosion of identity at different levels, such influences are more towards strengthening prevailing discourses.

However, unlike the media culture industry, the state is able to perform a dual role in the processes of producing culture—be it as meaning or explicitly as ideology. First, the state acts as an active agent in directly producing and/or patronizing ‘culture’ through, say, the media schools, commissioning varied ‘culture-ware’, sponsoring events and financing regional centres of folk culture (some of which the market and the Hindu right also do); and, second, that of regulating or selectively promoting cultural practices through jural and administrative means such as the Central Board of Film Certification, script board, structures of taxation and patterns of subsidies, awarding industry status to cultural forms, and so on. Thus, the state is in a better position to monopolize ‘culture-ware’—both in its production and representation. However, this is increasingly being challenged by competing forces from the market (representing both transnational and indigenous capital) and from society (fundamentalist and secessionist groups). As a result, on the one hand, the beginning of private broadcasting and cable transmission in the early 1990s represented an end to state monopoly in television production and distribution. On the other hand, the emergence of Hindutva as a competing force

in defining 'national culture' marked the biggest challenge to the legitimacy of the state as the central and sole interpreter of Brahmanical Hindu symbolism.

Emphasis on the market and the state should not blur the fact that there have persisted throughout history communication processes outside such dominant spheres. These have been articulations of the marginalized or the underdog, whose expressions have been relegated to the background of our social landscape. Often their means of communication have been either 'peripheralized' or enveloped by the glut of dominant communication; consequently, it is alleged, they 'failed' to attain universal appeal. Such institutions and practices of what can be called 'non-dominant communication' are viewed by the culture industry as 'remnants' of history, and by the modern state as a cultural fossil needing 'preservation'.

The term 'popular culture' has been used to refer to a wide variety of practices arising from either the overarching web of mass (-produced) culture, or from the contesting ideologies of national culture, or from the analytical category of non-dominant communication. Popular culture can be addressed from a range of perspectives—some limiting, others testing; some static, others more dynamic. The term was initially used by European social historians to indicate the history of the 'inarticulate'. However, in the last decade the term has gone through various redefinitions, been the subject of critique and has benefited by conceptual clarity and expansion. To begin with, there is wide consensus around the fact that popular culture is a political activity—directly and indirectly, consciously or otherwise. The study of popular culture, now undertaken by sociologists, media theorists and political scientists in addition to historians, is increasingly being linked to debates on the public sphere and those of transformatory politics. In India, additionally, its study has been linked with those of decolonization, subaltern consciousness and, most recently, modernity. Accordingly, it is alleged that we have arrived at a situation where either popular culture is thriving within the culture industry, or its very existence is threatened by homogeneity inherent to the culture industry.

Instead of arguing from such extremes, it would be more fruitful to approach cultural practices in general through the dialectics between processes of dominance and resistance. Equally, what is required is to approach cultural processes in a differentiated manner—a difference arising from their varied modes of production, relative prevalence

and social base. The need to shape such a perspective, I may add, is motivated as much by a critique of existing structures of communication and culture, as by an understanding of the drawbacks of past efforts to do so.

The media and its culture have been with us since the beginning of time. Recognizing that cultural practice today is being constantly produced and/or relocated by the mass-producing zeal of the media culture industry as also by the cultural matrix constructed by the state that does not exclude the existence of cultural processes outside/independent of such dominant fulcrums. The latter have emerged and continue to exist as an expression, more importantly as a documentation of 'another' view of events unfolding. One may add that, depending upon the political processes it is associated with, cultural practice articulating 'another' view could be pronounced as revivalist or interventionist.

Each epoch has thrown up a variety of cultural practices reflecting or questioning the problems and achievements of that particular society. At the same time, it is has been through a certain political tendency that cultural practices have been able to articulate a critique of the historical present. The plethora of social interventions in the sphere of communication which draw and build upon elements of the 'popular', is an instance of such cultural practice. Can one identify common undercurrents linking what appears to be diverse and often scattered cultural practices? In conducting such an investigation, one must move away from merely describing either the social application of communication technology or the role of various cultural practices; rather, one must focus on the social processes and the political conflicts that communication processes engages in.

Focusing on a spectrum of anti-systemic political processes (Arrighi et al. 1989) will bring to light not only how the 'popular' becomes interventionist, but also whether their aggregate hints at a communication process whose trajectory is different from that of dominant communication. The following pages put together fragmentary notes on those structures and processes of the 'popular' that are associated with projects of redefining and broadening the scope of the 'political'. By problematizing 'alternative communication', itself arising out of anti-systemic politics, I will analytically demonstrate how this praxis facilitates certain cultural practices in challenging the productive and symbolic basis of dominant institutions of communication.

## Alternative Communication as Cultural Practice

The term 'alternative', taken conceptually rather than literally, seems to have been first employed in the body of work now known as 'Development Studies'. There seems to be as yet no precise understanding, let alone even a broadly accepted definition, of 'alternative'. As a result, its connotations vary with themes, context, practitioners and writers. Despite a theoretical incoherence and conceptual variance, this notion has travelled to many spheres of social sciences, finding its way only recently in writings on culture and communication. The way in which other concepts whose genesis can be traced back to Development Studies (such as 'participatory' and 'grassroots') have been related with 'communication' is striking.

Contemporary Latin American and European efforts in the sphere of culture and communication has been largely responsible for conceptualizing and emphasizing such a perspective in our agenda. What one had inferred is that their understanding of 'alternative' suggests a hybrid between a present-day derivative of Gramsci's 'subaltern' and Brecht's notion of the 'popular'; both essentially symptomatic of an oppositional tendency towards what the former called 'the official world that has emerged historically' (Gramsci 1977). This rich genealogy aside, the term 'alternative' remains and will remain elusive as long as it fails to clarify:

1. whether it is suggestive of a rupture from historical processes of communication, or part of a continuum of conflicting articulations concerning the production and interpretation of social reality;
2. how it defines established processes and structures of communication it seeks to contend or transform?
3. whether it exclusively concerns initiatives by progressive coalitions or includes cultural innovations by fundamentalist and neo-conservative forces as well.

One needs to, consequently, sieve through history as much to (re)view the genealogy of non-dominant communication as to understand political tendencies in popular culture to refine the notion of 'alternative' in the present context.

Understanding communication as a process is to understand the production of ideas and articulation of social relations. Historically, the presence of non-dominant communication is indicative, first, of an ideological assertion of subjugated knowledge systems; second, of articulations which either the 'system' cannot assimilate (asystemic) or are confrontationist to its needs (anti-systemic) and third, of specific processes that have been peripheralized by the politico-economic organization of the media culture industry. On its part, non-dominant communication is often said to consist of those practices whose endogenous yet assimilative development have not conformed to the aesthetic values and thematic criteria of Euro-modernism; importantly, they are largely sustained through an intrinsic local essence in addressing social issues of the moment. This is evident in those articulations of the 'popular' that are invariably clubbed under the umbrella term of 'folk culture'.

However, equating the 'non-dominant' with the totality of the 'popular' is as much a methodological error as viewing it to intrinsically fuel the 'alternative' is an ideological one. For one, there are instances where the 'popular' is so harnessed that it in fact (re)asserts elements of dominance. In the first real boost to Hindutva's mass mobilization in the late 1980s, one may recall, newspapers, radio and television did not contribute significantly. Rather, it was achieved by appropriating the traditional form of *yatra* (pilgrimage)—beginning with the *Ram Janaki yatra* in 1984 to the infamous *rath yatra* (Palampur–Ayodhya) of 1989. In a de-feudalizing society, political processes pivoted around and projected through such de-contextualized idioms of popular culture proved 'successful'. For a significant period the degree and nature of this 'success' even overtook the consensus-building potential of the electronic media, itself harnessed later by Hindutva in its use of video vans. These mobile churches evoked 'public opinion' by screening films and other audio-visual products, heralding the birth of a new, albeit reactionary, politicization of culture in India.

Similarly, there exist communication processes which, although peripheral to the established norms of the culture industry, are in their modes of social organization surprisingly conformist. Take the case of 'participatory video', an exercise in development communication that has hitherto been largely *for* the non-dominant and not *by* them. In most cases this exercise is typified either by a top–down approach of

participation and/or is guided by the notion of 'target groups'—the phrase itself being blindly borrowed from the advertising industry.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, media interventions at the periphery, despite being (relatively) innovative in themselves, cannot be *ipso facto* termed 'alternative' as in their instrumental use of the media and conventional social organization of communication they diverge from the ideological basis of 'another' politics.

Keeping this in mind, how can our insights on history and reflections on the present help in sharpening perspectives on 'alternative communication'?

At a rudimentary level, alternative communication concerns social articulations that, in devising new practices in the media and organically linked to processes redefining and broadening the 'political', challenge the monopoly of established modes of communication (Stangelaar, Unpublished). My inquiries reveal that what is being referred to as alternative communication represents, first, media interventions associated with anti- and asystemic processes concerning the politics of recognition and redistribution; and, second, ideologically relevant cultural innovations within the mass media oriented towards affirmative or transformatory advocacy (Parthasarathi 1997). On the face of it, these appear as two distinct processes. While this is true in some instances, what is crucial to understand is that both arise from varied degrees of opposition to the material and symbolic basis of the systemic universals—be it the state or the culture industry. Since the culture industry essentially projects a particular mode of producing and reproducing social life, the praxis of alternative communication seeks to challenge this dominant mode of producing life. In other words, alternative communication occupies itself, directly and indirectly, with questioning the character of current economic activity and related political structures, that is, questioning the 'discourse of Development' (Escobar 1984).

In this context, the entry of the underclass into processes of communication has signified not merely a change in social agents; it has, more importantly, transformed their status from being consumers of mass culture to the producers of a radical/competing popular culture; from being the source of 'information' for the culture industry to proactive subjects of counter-cultural words and images. Quite obviously, thus, the present thrust of alternative communication also seeks to

transform the social organization of various institutions of culture and communication from being a minority political monopoly to majority social representation (Somavia 1982). This demands that articulations therein be free to express themselves in a non-standard 'language' inasmuch as they are an attempt at cultural decolonization.

It is from such a perspective that one needs to view interventionist tendencies in contemporary cultural practice. Only by analysing its social basis and the political processes it is associated with would one be able to determine whether its existence—as being simply innovative or holistically counter-cultural—resonates with the praxis of alternative communication. Before going further, however, two factors need to be kept in mind.

Historically, communication processes independent of the dominant sphere have been prevalent in different ways. Moreover, such processes have varied with identity, such as class, gender and ethnicity, as also with space—rural, metropolitan and now cyberspace. It is the technological wonders of our present 'information age' that have (once again) enabled the production of 'outside the dominant sphere' possible, even if it is to a limited extent as is the case today. Thus, at one level, alternative communication reflects a mixture of pre-industrial and industrial modes of communication. Second, realizing that alternative communication involves strengthening a distinct ideological sphere should not blur the fact that such an augmentation has been largely facilitated by adopting and adapting, the prevailing communication technology. Thus, at the analytical level most current practices in the alternative communication are essentially superstructural innovations by cultural activists. However, neither should one pessimistically infer that these efforts at alternative communication are too benign vis-à-vis the all-pervasive mass media, nor jump to the conclusion that it is the coming into being of a coherent politics of 'alternative communication'.

In the immediate context, the notion of alternative communication enables me to conceptualize the multidimensional links between the politics of resistance and the emancipatory dimensions of the arts, the media and cultural practice in general. An agenda for emancipation drawing on the gamut of existing counter-cultural articulations can be said to have three components: demystifying existing structures and mechanisms of the culture industry; unifying cultural practices sharing common ideological undercurrents and submitting a constructive critique of the modes of representation in such cultural practices.

## Dominance and Cultural Practice

The ruling knowledge system is most typified by television, as the electronic church has come to be the dominant mode of producing the governing culture. The evolution of television technology and its economic organization reflects a structuring of choices (Williams 1974). During such structuring, priorities were fixed and a hierarchy was created concerning the way in which society uses its collective resources for individuals. Operating on the aesthetics of spectacle and dictated by the economics of advertising, the television industry has increasingly come to condition, if not explicitly, to regulate the day-to-day life of individuals—individuals who are simultaneously consumers and citizens. We live in a period when an event is said to have ‘occurred’ only when ‘reported’ on television (Parthasarathi 1991); the credibility of a political perspective depends upon the media exposure it gets. For me, media representation, especially that of conflict, essentially draws on the politics of the remembered, the imagined and the contracted. In a consumer society the imagery of the ‘popular’ has been created by the dominant media and since this latter is invariably associated either with the state or the market, its representation thus constructed has been a de-politicized or a-politicized one. Such representation needs to be consciously scrutinized and incessantly challenged. Since the praxis of alternative communication is politically benign without critique, endeavours at portraying conflict in popular culture are incomplete without building a critical perspective.

That upmarket issues such as deep ecology find prominence in the mass media, and consequently impact pop music, art and television documentary, only substantiates my belief that the key to the politics of representation lies in the ‘packaging’ of conflict. Take the case of gender politics. Rejecting its earlier view of women’s movements being a reflection of Western ideology, the mass media in India has come round to providing space for collective efforts against the oppression of women. Yet in bringing such ‘women’s issues’ under its umbrella, the mass media shies away from questioning patriarchy, the supremacy of the monogamous family and sexual preference. What we see, thus, is the dominant media instrumentally employing ‘women’s struggle’ to project an apparent ideological pluralism and political liberalism. On the other hand, despite the peripheralization of subordinate modes of communication taking place this very moment, popular

culture associated with the underclass is vibrant in India. However, in instances where such traditions of culture and communication continue to be associated with a technology and social organization of its very specific milieu, such practices are portrayed as being a remnant of the past. A historical analysis of the peripheralization of such institutions of popular culture reveals otherwise. That the processes and structures of such media run contrary to dominant values, ideological propositions and organizational norms of the culture industry is what makes them appear 'backward' or 'anti-modern'. In other words, since technology interacts in different ways with society as also with pre-dating modes of communication, it is the techno-industrial base of the mass media that has defined its pre-eminence relative to other (pre-dating and contemporary) institutions of culture and communication. This explains why local cultural practices, overshadowed as they are by the mass media, appear archaic and lacking in dynamism. Popular culture, especially whose social base lies in the agrarian underclass, over a period of time gets meshed with the dynamics of the mass media market. Typically, such local practices get absorbed first into the national and thereafter into the global culture industry—it is another matter that once absorbed, they get redefined in terms of a dominant style by the culture industry. Of course, on searching hard one does find instances where social actors associated with popular culture choose to remain peripheral to the culture industry, as they realize their essence being in addressing local aspirations *in situ*. The case of *bhangra* may be mentioned here. It has over the years been transformed from being a local cultural form to being the darling of metropolitan Punjabi popular music. No coincidence that it was a cultural form originally associated with a community richest in expatriate or migrant Indians. The complete marginalization of local institutions of culture and communication (the Phad-assisted ballad in Marwar) or alternatively their transformation from being local institutions to being monopoly industrial activities (such as *bhangra* pop/cattle market-based religious faire), is essentially the challenge beckoning popular culture in India.

The glut of folk pop in India and abroad together with the related birth of 'world music' in recent years may seem to indicate a wider number of people having access to, and being producers of, popular music. For me, this perfectly illustrates the biggest paradox concerning

media technology in our times. On the one hand, we are in era where we have the technology to democratize communication in a manner unimaginable a century ago. On the other hand, the biggest hurdle to the democratic social organization of communication, and therefore strengthening the 'popular', is the corporate control of communication technology and over media production. Hence, the belief that the technological possibilities demonstrated within the mass media make it the privileged and most dynamic terrain of popular culture, hides more than it reveals.

A more holistic perspective on communication technology brings to light its three principal facets. Communication technology is, first, economics, being a product in itself as well as the raw material for the creation of cultural products; second, it is knowledge, in itself as also being an instrument for the further generation of knowledge either as ideology or as culture and, finally, it is social structure, as its production and utilization is defined by class, gender and race.<sup>3</sup>

One corollary is that dominant ideas governing communication technology, in their drive to universalize themselves, effectively marginalize subordinate institutions of communication. For instance, when optimists rejoice at TV reaching the villages and articulate it as the 'democratization of technology', they fail to mention that the success of the culture industry is at the cost of a vibrant popular culture—back to the zero-sum game mentioned in the beginning. Moreover, far from being neutral, communication technology responds to the dominant tendencies of societies, and, thus, mediates relations between individuals and groups in a society. What satellite TV has brought to the villages in the subcontinent in the 1990s is a mass culture produced and governed by a national, increasingly transnational, industrial minority. Such a critical conceptualization concerning television's inroads into society, therefore, uncovers the ideological packaging of what media optimists choose to label the 'democratization of technology'. In fact, even the proto-history of communication in the previous century indicates that the very trajectory of technological innovation was determined either by its business application (Laing 1991) or by the need to maintain a social structure (Ghose 1995).<sup>4</sup>

Attention has often been drawn to innovative applications of communication technology in a participatory manner, which it is alleged runs contrary to the media industry. A case in point is the social

application of video technology towards the varied practices clubbed under 'development communication'. On the face of it, video technology has been employed towards the self-expression of the voiceless and marginalized. In celebrating the alleged contribution of such participatory video, what is often pointed out is the degree of innovation and novelty in the social application of dominant technology. However, to begin with, an innovative application of technology does not in itself reflect emancipatory tendencies in cultural interventions. What is crucial is that besides portraying 'alternative' imagery, video activism involves questioning the legitimacy of dominant representation as also exposing the institutional process delivering this dominant imagery (D'Agostino and Tafler 1995: xvii). Efforts in participatory video have invariably come round to being exercises for the underclass and not by the underclass, as mentioned before. Moreover, the notion of participation itself is being harnessed by industry (in office management and labour relations) (Waterman 1988) and by the state (such as *panchayat raj*). Consequently, not only is a radical epistemological shift required in the notion of participation, but, if and when it is achieved, such participation would constitute but one aspect of democratizing communication processes.

Moreover, the three aforesaid facets of technology impart every means of communication a content, an ideological content, which is a function of its primary social objective. This substantially lays down the range of priorities concerning the utilization of communication technology. In other words, what needs to be realized is that the socio-economic origin of communication technology substantially defines its principal application (Hamelink 1986).

Having said this, are we to infer that these origins are so 'loaded' that they outweigh any significant alternative, notably an unintended social application of communication technology?

## Resistance and Cultural Practice

To begin with, one needs to move away from simply elucidating either the applications of communication technology in general or the character of non-dominant media in particular. In recognizing that communication technology under certain circumstances may contribute to a movement away from dominant norms of representation and

established modes of organization, one realizes that the means and mode of communication provide a framework of possibilities and parameters within which political processes operate. Thus, perspectives on alternative communication must focus equally on the political and economic arenas that contextualize non-dominant communication, that is, the related functions to which they are applied, the modes of representation it enables and the manner in which these are socially organized. In their efforts at challenging the material and symbolic basis of institutionalized systems of dominance, contemporary social movements are said to be redefining and widening the nature and scope of political processes.<sup>5</sup> These changes in their articulation of the 'political' reflect in their mode of communication: practices consisting of a selection, modification and/or opposition to dominant communication. Communication processes associated with social movements in India have moved away from relying entirely on the dominant (mass) media; in the process they have often succeeded in creating distinct ways in which communication processes are socially organized, going well beyond traditions of the agitprop (Sanghvi 1997). Since social movements take place at the 'intersection of culture, practice (both collective and everyday) and politics', they equally reflect efforts at creating alternative frameworks of meaning (Escobar 1992: 396). In many ways, therefore, at the heart of anti-systemic movements in general is the issue of representation, which directly relates to information, communication and cultural practice. This explains cultural innovations in movements concerning folk songs, painting and puppetry in their campaigns, as also trade unions building further on their rich history of street theatre.<sup>6</sup> One may add that the evolution of such alternative modes of communication and representation is not only endogenous to a movement, but is equally realized between various modes of organization, be they autonomous groups, coalition groups or unions, towards common strategic orientations.

Like the varied processes that constitute anti-systemic politics in general, instances of critical media interventions can be found in the 'cracks' within or on the margins of the culture industry. Illustrative of this are a handful of news agencies, journals and publishing houses operating within the dominant sphere and, despite the economic constraints of the media industry (Butalia 1993). It has indeed been difficult to strike a balance between the need for affirmative voices from within the mass media to strengthen the politics of recognition

and the importance of independent articulations to foster the politics of redistribution. For, in the first place, some such initiatives have a tense relationship with the larger media culture industry. Nevertheless, despite the presence of co-optive universals, there is every reason and need to harness available space within the conservative democracies of today. Second, it has been observed that initiatives rooted in furthering citizens' politics, itself beset with internal contradictions, are often unable to contribute towards the creation of an alternative culture of discourse (Sethi 1997). For me, only when critique is realized as a state of consciousness is the production of 'culture' (be it as image, text or sound) able to contribute towards a larger conscientization. Finally, before celebrating cultural interventions by anti-systemic movements and complementary innovations outside their fold as a definitive process of alternative communication, one would like to recall that most such 'interventions' have been, and largely remain, at the superstructural level. Nevertheless, in opposing the foundations of dominant communication, they represent varying degrees of challenge to systemic norms. What is significant, however, is that some such processes have sought to prevent the reproduction of structures of dominance—equally through their modes of representation as through their social organization of communication.

It has been difficult for me to discern why the 'modern', especially when Euro-American in origin, is considered intrinsically superior and, therefore, desirable. At the other end are propositions to revive social institutions and, therefore, cultural practices in the name of preserving tradition. Being well aware of the contradiction between living heritage and social transformation, which more often than otherwise emerges as an apology for the status quo, one is far from soliciting the preservation of certain streams of cultural practice, either as tradition per se or as *exotica* for display. For me, if any medium of communication is unable to retain its capacity to reflect changing social aspirations, the vitality of the medium undoubtedly ceases to prevail. Instead of a short-sighted preservation of, say, folk culture as a space for articulations by those forgotten in the electronic era, my emphasis on the 'popular' is oriented towards a critical rejuvenation of subordinate knowledge systems.

A deeper analysis reveals that the influence of institutions of culture and communication is essentially a product of competing knowledge systems, and, only thereafter of competing technology.

That television appears to have influenced the adoption of fertilizers by farmers is indicative first and foremost of the success of the discourse of modernization (agriculture dependent on canal irrigation, on HW seeds and, of course, chemical fertilizers), and only thereafter of broadcast technology and programmes on agriculture through it (like *Krishi Darshan*). After all, farmers have taken to fertilizers in regions where television is still inaccessible to them! As a result, a perspective on popular culture rooted in alternative communication must highlight political processes concerning a critical rejuvenation of subordinate and/or dormant knowledge systems. Thus, only those interventions in popular culture that either pivot around a critical rejuvenation of subordinate knowledge systems towards facilitating the assertion of people's rights, can be regarded as initiatives in alternative communication.

The right to inform and be informed implies that the vertical dispensation of knowledge to consumers by those who have access and means to produce it should give way to a beneficial exchange through horizontal, dialogical interaction—each individual or community being at the same time a provider and receiver of experiences. Those who discharge specialized functions should become aware of this political requirement and their own learning process should reflect this need. Although processes of alternative communication involve practices in different media as also across a variety of social subjects, they are invariably directed at the creation of a public sphere: a socio-cultural common that stands distinctly from the institutions and norms of the state and the market.

Throughout history the village square, *chai* shops, grain *mandis* and street corners, have been the space for debating political happenings and societal gossip. From an aggregate of many such encounters developed what some call 'public opinion' which was oriented variously towards consensus building or reaffirming dominant norms. In other words, the historical public sphere provided a milieu in which politics and social values came to be framed. Of course, at different times in history this public sphere excluded different individuals and communities based on class, caste and gender; it neither provided for a dialogue based on equity, nor did it shape all aspects of social life. What is equally important to realize, however, is that such public spheres did indeed contribute their share of dissent and criticism against dominant social articulations.

With the proliferation of radio, television and satellite broadcasting, the social role and political importance of such public spaces has changed drastically. They have either been peripheralized to various extents or have ceased to be the primary locus of political debate and cultural production. While both the state and citizens alike are still being attuned to what is essentially a market-driven 'publicness' (such as in broadcasting), the latest avatar of publicness (the internet) is already being promoted as one that will not only broaden the terrain of popular culture, but also redefine the scope of democratic processes in the next century.

What needs to be recognized is that the nature of cultural practice within the electronic and virtual public spaces have their own logic, their own ways of forming public opinion and distinct ways of constructing social relations, as compared to the historical, pre-mass media, public spaces. It has been observed that new sites of publicness such as television, due to their intrinsic techno-cultural form and techno-economic organization, have contributed more towards isolating individuals rather than bringing them together (Corner 1995: 12–15). Moreover, the social organization of communication shaping the electronic public sphere has led to a wider terrain and covert forms of mediation. The caste/class divide, the biggest hindrance to interaction in the pre-industrial public sphere, has been compounded by institutions of broadcasting and computer-mediated communication (CMC). This has not only created another caste/class divide based on limited access and participation, but has superimposed such divides on the apex of prevailing socio-political stratification. In influencing the production and representation of 'culture', these factors set limits to the emancipatory character and interventionist potential of the public sphere in the evolving digital era.

Although they break with traditional forms of social articulation, this break is primarily at the level of technology (the means of communication) and not necessarily with prevailing modes of representation and of social organization of communication. Therefore, the social context and economic parameters within which 'new', dominant public spaces are operating share with predating communication technologies (printing and broadcasting) stratification based on access, participation and 'language'. If the electronic church of the day, namely, television, has become the hallmark of dominance, how sure can we be of a church

in the making—the internet—especially when the latter is fragmenting on the one hand and stratifying on the other?

Nevertheless, one should recognize that technologies such as direct-to-home (DTH) transmission and CMC are something new and their effects on anti-systemic politics do not have historical precedents. Moreover, their specific social applications have demonstrated that they could be employed as a means to question the state (through counter-information campaigns) as also challenge private property (by redistributing organized knowledge). Recognizing the ways in which political discourse has been mediated in the electronic era, we need to act on the possibilities this ‘new’ publicness might provide in terms of decentralization and dialogue—all through keeping in mind that they continue to be largely guided by access to ‘technology’, viewed here in terms of both a machinery and a language.

Consequently, we must examine changes in technology, their economic organization and related cultural practice, together with the character of the public sphere they create, without either a euphoria for the ‘new’ or a nostalgia for the ‘traditional’. Only a thorough understanding of communication processes unfolding in an aggregate of ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ publicness in general will facilitate critical and collective interventions being integrated with larger anti-systemic forces.

We have arrived at a situation where institutions of culture and communication are being absorbed by the techno-organizational complex of a consumerist culture industry, which reproduces them in a homogeneous and homogenizing manner. Simultaneously, cultural practice is being relocated by the state seeking to construct and impose a fabric akin to a national culture. Towards attaining their respective forms of conformism, both the state and the market tend to subvert diversity and dissent, which has been an intrinsic character of cultural practice.

If cultural practices associated with larger anti-systemic processes are envisaged within the terrain of the public sphere, then the praxis of alternative communication would constitute the ‘playing field’ of this terrain. However, it is through a certain political tendency that cultural practice in general is able to articulate a critique of the historical present. As long as alternative communication as a political praxis is able to retain its capacity to reflect the urges and aspirations of anti-systemic processes, it will maintain its political dynamism.

In the quest for coherently realizing the elusive ‘alternative’, the plethora of communication processes and cultural practices are an experience to be acted upon—both, critically and constructively, as in practice in theory.

## Notes

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1. For ‘symbolic content’, see Thompson (1995: 23–24); for ‘mass medium’, see Corner (1995: 14–15).
2. For contrasting approaches to the use of video, see Sarkar and Agarwal (1997), and White and Patel (1994).
3. Ekecrantz (1986) adds that technology is ‘politics’, that is, a power structure and a bureaucracy system as well. For me, this is an extension of the aforementioned three.
4. For observations on the inter-relationship between political control and knowledge systems concerning the telegraph in the same period, see Choudhury (2005).
5. Kothari (1984) is one of the earliest writers on such a political process. Subsequently, a variety of scholars, commenting on different regions, have commented upon such ‘new’ politics from varying theoretical perspectives. For a conceptual framework on contemporary social movements, see Fuentes and Frank (1989). For an overview of social movements in the South, see Wignaraja (1993). Specifically on the Indian scenario, see Omvedt (1994).
6. For critical self-reflections by a theatre activist, see Deshpande (1997).

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# 3

## THE INDIAN LEGAL SYSTEM: A UNIQUE COMBINATION OF TRADITIONS, PRACTICES AND MODERN VALUES\*

KARINE BATES

### Introduction

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Throughout its history the Indian legal system has not presented a uniform set of structures and sources of law to solve conflicts. This explains why, in many cases, clan and caste *panchayats* rendered decisions on concurrent issues with the courts established by the princes of an area and later on by the British colonizers. In order to capture the complexity of the changes that occurred in the various instances of dispute resolutions, the interplay between different interpretations and sanctions of Hindu law by some rulers and by the post-independence legal system in India will be examined.

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The first section of this chapter presents aspects of the Indian legal system prior to the intervention of the British. Literature review of archival legal records will serve as examples of the interplay between local dispute resolutions and the intervention of the Peshwa rulers in Pune during the eighteenth century. In the second section, the redefinition of Hindu law by the British is discussed as well as the implementation of a modern legal apparatus in India. Finally, the third section is devoted to review how post-independence India has continued with the ‘modernization’ of the legal system undertaken by the British. Different reforms, such as the land reforms modified women’s access to property and resources. Sometimes, reforms and new laws intended to improve women’s access to property, as was the case with the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, which conferred upon widows’ succession rights to their husbands’ property. However, after more than 55 years, this Act has not been implemented. A variety of reasons explain this. The relationship of widows in rural Maharashtra with the legal system and the local norms of dispute resolutions will help us understand the differences between written law, its interpretation by multiple parties of a dispute and the local practices related to access to property for widows.

In this chapter the history of the Indian legal system is presented from the perspective of Hindu law. Where data are available, there is special focus on women’s rights, especially widows. Rural Pune district and the state of Maharashtra will be at the core of the discussion.

## The Pre-British Period

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In pre-British India, there were many overlapping local jurisdictions. The *Dharmashastra*, a respected ancient system of written law, did not operate as the unifier of the legal system on the territory of what would become the Indian nation. The political conditions for unification were not present in India, mainly because of the diverse local levels of conflict resolutions, practices and the capacity of local authorities to make rules. Under the Moghuls and other Muslim rulers, royal courts were established in cities and administrative centres. These courts exercised a general criminal (and sometimes commercial) jurisdiction. They also decided civil and family matters among the Muslim population. Over that period Hindus were generally granted their own tribunals in civil matters. Muslim rulers did not attempt to control the administration

of law in the villages, and the royal courts did not extend their powers very much in the countryside.

During the pre-British period, at the village level, local councils served both legislative and judicial functions. These forums were mainly of two forms: caste *panchayats* (usually consisting of the prominent men of the caste) and village *panchayats* (Cohn 1965; Minturn and Hitchcock 1966). It is also important to mention the tribal councils among tribal communities of the Indian subcontinent. Although the groups' composition and the level at which they operated are different, the exclusion of women is common to these institutions. Women had little to say either in framing the rules made by these councils or concerning the process by which these rules were enforced. This implies that disputes that involved women were settled by male authorities and male-made rules. There were exceptions, such as the Santal tribals (Archer 1984) or the Bhats (Luchinsky, Unpublished) in Uttar Pradesh, where women were allowed to attend tribal council meetings.

In rural Maharashtra local councils were not the only legal institutions before the British colonization. Some regional kings had their own system of courts sometimes ruling along with the caste council. This was the case of the Peshwa court in Pune. Contrary to the image of ancient India where most women were traditionally deprived of their rights, rulings of caste councils and the ones of the Peshwa courts were not always detrimental to them. The following examples demonstrate the plurality of conflict resolutions instances, the coexistence of local and royal punishments, as well as the diverse interpretations of women's rights and duties.

## Legal Records from the Late Eighteenth Century under the Peshwas

In the late eighteenth century (1767–91), the city of Pune<sup>1</sup> was the administrative and political centre of the Maratha confederacy. The head of the Pune police (and the city's municipal commissioner) was the *kotwal*, appointed by the Peshwa, the *de facto* head of the confederacy. As government agent, the *kotwal* was the keeper of the social values of the people of Pune (Wagle 1998: 51). The laws he administered found their origins at the Peshwa government level. These laws covered several categories of offences and were applied to the heterogeneous communities. What is particularly interesting from a legal

anthropological perspective is that the *kotwal* took the varied cultural norms and social status of each community into account.

The relationship between caste councils and the *kotwal* is not clear. What is clear from the cases available in the *kotwal* papers<sup>2</sup> is that there were overlapping jurisdictions between the caste *panchayat* and the Peshwa state in punitive matters, particularly with regard to crimes relating to the violation of caste norms and sexual misconduct. Thus, according to Gune (1953: 85) and Kadam (1988: 341–43), the Peshwas expanded state control over traditional judicial arrangements. The *kotwal*'s appointment of nominated members on the local *panchayats* was one of the means of asserting effective control over the decisions of the latter. The caste *panchayat* or local *panchayat* worked in collaboration with the government to enforce punishments. There were three types of punishment: royal punishment, *prayaschitta* (ritual prescriptions for penance) and the exclusion of caste-fellows from the caste (Gune 1953: 109–14). The Peshwa government applied royal punishment and also had ultimate decisional power on all excommunications and re-entries to a caste. It also had jurisdiction over matrimonial conflicts and sexual misconduct.

The government, through the *kotwal*, had a *droit de regard* over the *jatis*' or castes' decisions. The government was informed of the events surrounding all suicides and other deaths by violence. Also, the *jatis* had to inform the government of their decisions, and failure to do so attracted a fine. The *kotwal* may or may not agree with their decisions. In an example of the government ruling over cases, the *kotwal* established that Nathu's wife committed suicide because of her husband's beatings. Within a month, the *got* (caste assembly) of the Telis of Pune had decided that Nathu should be ostracized from the *jati*. But two other Telis failed to enforce the decision of the *got* by socializing with Nathu. The government summoned the two men and decided in favour of the *jati*'s ruling. The two Telis should have conformed to the *got*'s decision (Wagle 1998: 21). A similar decision was taken in another case (Gune 1953: 366). A 17-year-old girl was raped and her father brought the matter to court. The rapist was arrested and imprisoned. In addition, the girl's 'caste brotherhood' (*bandhusudha*) of the village seized the family *watan* (ancestral land) from the guilty man and the *watan* rights were divided among other family members. The court ratified the caste's decision.

In addition to discussing the overlapping jurisdiction with the *jati*, historian N.K. Wagle (1998) presents a review of the ways in which the *kotwal* administered justice, especially towards women. The majority of cases selected by Wagle demonstrate that the *kotwal* often took women's complaints seriously. Also, he did not hesitate to punish offenders, whether men or women, when fault was proven.

Some cases involved men's violence towards women. Harki came to the *cavdi* (police station) to complain that her husband had been beating her. The husband was summoned and the investigation proved that he was indeed beating his innocent wife. He was fined and had to promise not to beat his wife again (ibid.: 17). However, in some cases the husband was considered to have rightfully beaten his wife. This was the case of Hasan Musalman who beat his wife because she cheated on him with Badlya Vani (she participated in sexual misbehaviour, *badkarma*). Hasan also went with a stick to beat Vani. After committing these violent acts he went to the *cavdi* and proved that his wife had committed *badkarma*. It was Vani who was fined (ibid.). The information provided by Wagle does not always clarify the reason men beat their wives, but when a reason is given it is linked to alleged infidelity on the part of the wife. It appears that violence was not related to property or dowry issues. It is important to mention that men did not have to physically assault a woman to be held responsible for injuries or death. This was the case in instances of suicide, in which a man (generally the husband) could be held responsible for a woman's suicide (ibid.: 20–21). This was so because women often killed themselves due to their husbands' physical abuse. In some cases, men were also held responsible for the suicide of their mistresses.

Other cases presented domestic violence perpetrated by female offenders. In several cases mothers-in-law ill-treated their daughters-in-law. Devki branded her 10-year-old daughter-in-law without the latter being at fault. The mother-in-law was fined Rs 45 (ibid.: 17). Women's suicides were sometimes caused by the mother-in-law's ill-treatment in collaboration with other members of the husband's household (ibid.: 22–23). In these cases, women as well as men were punished.

Although not numerous, some cases illustrate that men were at times the victims of women, such as in the case of Pari Kumbharin of Sukravar Peth. She beat her husband without him being at fault, which resulted in his death. A fine of Rs 95, rather heavy for that time, was imposed on her.

The death was not regarded as a murder, but an accident (ibid.: 18). Several cases indicate that poison was commonly used to kill husbands (ibid.: 18–19). Women were sometimes involved in men's suicides. This happened to Saguni, whose lover committed suicide when he found out that she had another lover. She was held responsible for it and was sold for Rs 100 to recover the fine (ibid.: 26).<sup>3</sup>

*Shastric* norms of punishment were not always followed, contrary to the British perception of a systematic implementation of traditional Hindu law. Pre-British India had more flexible ways to settle disputes. The different sanctions dispensed by the *kotwal's* office may be explained by the fact that the decisions over the sanctions were made according to local practices in the city of Pune.

The rulers and the ruled were the same people, operating within the parameters of the value system that was current, which both rulers and ruled tried to understand and interpret.... The structure of the fines imposed by the Kotwal to deter crimes was guided by considerations of financial affordability and by factors such as poverty and insolvency. (ibid.: 52)

Wagle (ibid.: 18) also says: 'The amount of the fine depended on the financial worthiness of a person and on the principle of the ability to pay. It does not necessarily reflect on the nature of the offense.'

The value system of the local people was transmitted to the *kotwal* by the *batmidars* who acted as paid informants drawn from amongst the people. This explains why fines were adjusted according to the economic status of the guilty person and why in some cases it led to the suspension of the fines. The *batmidar* was also the person who informed the *kotwal* about the judicial cases in a specific community or village. This was how the *kotwal* was aware of what was going on in the different areas under his jurisdiction.

The cases cited illustrate the variety of sanctions imposed by the *kotwal* as well as the differences between the sanctions established by the ancient *shastric* texts and the local norms of punishment. The local decision of the *kotwal* and the *jatis* do not correspond with the sanctions of the *shastric* texts. These texts were also subject to interpretation by the Brahman *shastris* (scholars of the *Dharmashastra*) of Pune. Their views varied strikingly. For instance, the most extreme *shastris* would recommend castration or death for a man in the case

of rape and drowning a woman or mutilating her body for having committed abortion, and a similar punishment would be directed towards people who assisted a woman in obtaining an abortion. Other *shastris* proposed less extreme punishments: in the case of rape and abortion they would stand for heavy fines instead of killing, castration or drowning. By demonstrating the multiple reinterpretation of sacred Hindu texts by scholars and government officials, Wagle has added important evidence that the 'Hindu tradition' cannot be apprehended as a monolithic category.

Historian and anthropologist Anne Waters (1998) concludes similarly in her study based on published extracts from the Peshwa Daftar.<sup>4</sup> Her study presents 'a view of a pre-colonial state of considerable complexity, a state that may best be characterized by the flexibility and pragmatism of its judgements' (ibid.: 3). The different examples selected by Waters do not constitute a representative sample. They are, instead, an initial attempt at reconstructing women's experience with the legal system of that period from available materials.

According to the examples she provides, the court decisions look very different than the standard academic perception of 'traditional law', which is supposed to be guided by the Sanskritic law of colonial India's Orientalist writings. On the contrary, the courts were more concerned with the pragmatic of social problems rather than with following textual prescriptions (ibid.: 12). The decisions were also a mix of legal prescription and custom. This was the result in a murder case. Moro Shimpi murdered his wife, alleging that she committed adultery (Gune 1953: 365). The husband admitted the crime and was fined Rs 2,000. But it was customary that when the marriage did not last because of the fault of the bride, the groom was entitled to recuperate the wealth or property he had given at the time of the wedding (bride price). So he was entitled to reclaim the Rs 300 he had given as bride price, although his accusation of infidelity could be seen with scepticism.

Although both Wagle's and Waters' evidence demonstrate that there were great differences between the sanction prescribed by the *shastric* texts and the *kotwal's* contextualized punishments, historian Uma Chakravarti (1995) estimates that the Peshwa's increasing recourse to Brahmanic interpretations led to the expansion of Brahmanical gender ideology. Her review of the *kotwal's* papers illustrates that the sentences against Brahman women were more severe than for

lower-caste women. Does this indicate a reinforcement of Brahmanic ideology or flexibility in the *kotwal* system as Wagle and Waters claim? It is difficult to draw conclusions on these three studies because more researches are needed. The records are incomplete and there is no overview of all cases. Therefore, it is not possible to evaluate the case sample; only reinterpretation is possible. What is certain is that based on limited evidence, the authors come to different conclusions. On the other hand, whatever the case is, stricter reinforcement of Brahmanic rules, especially for Brahmans, did take place.

## British Modification of Law

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In the western part of India the colonial period lasted nearly 130 years (1818–1947). The major changes provoked by British colonization had profound impacts on the indigenous population, which had to adapt to a colonial economy. New administrative arrangements were made in order to deal with the introduction of new land revenue systems, the rise of administrative and marketing towns and the introduction of administrative–judicial institutions. This new kind of administration had an impact on the production of subsistence crops and also on many of the social structures. The reactions of people in western India were a mix of resilience, continuity and change.

Along with these changes, the British transformed and tried to supplant indigenous legal systems, and in particular the system known as Hindu law. Before examining the interplay of these various instances of conflict resolutions, it is necessary to present the main orientations of the British concerning the legal system.

The British introduced the concept of a modern legal system in India, with uniform territorial rules based on universalistic norms that linked rights and obligations to specific transactions rather than to fixed birth status or caste (Galanter 1989: 15). The rules were to be administered by a hierarchy of courts where a bureaucracy of professionals employed rational procedures (*ibid.*).

According to Galanter, there were two distinct, but overlapping, stages of the introduction of a modern legal system in India (*ibid.*: 17). The first was initiated by Warren Hastings who organized a system of courts for the hinterland of Bengal (Misra 1959, 1961; Patra 1961). The expansion of the governments' judicial institutions and the initiation

of legislation characterized this period. The second stage began in approximately 1860, with the extensive codification of the law. The sources of law became more fixed and legislation became the dominant means of modifying the law.

During the first period Hastings' plan assumed that there was a Hindu body of law comparable to the English one. This plan took orthodox Brahmanic learning as the standard of Hindu law (Derrett 1961b: 80). This implies that the British authority was looking for authoritative texts applied by officials according to specified procedures. Over that period, the British clearly stated that Indians should be ruled by their own laws (Collector of Madura v. Mootoo Ramalinga [1868] 12 MIA 397). Although they realized that there were a multitude of rules and laws governing the Hindus, they insisted on searching for an authoritative body. They made collections and translations of ancient texts and recent commentaries, but the Indian law proved to be elusive (Hunter 1897: 371). Maine (1890: 209) speaks of the 'vast gasps and interspaces in the substantive law of India'. According to this famous British scholar, India was 'a country singularly empty of law' (ibid.: 225). Many departments of law were scarcely represented in the written *shastra* (Derrett 1959: 48ff, 1964: 109–10; Maine 1895: 51). It was soon acknowledged that the *shastra* only represented one part of the law and that in many matters Indians were regulated by less formal bodies of customary law. But customary law was not sufficient and they filled the interstices of *shastra* and custom with 'unamalgamated masses of foreign law' (Maine 1895: 76). Therefore, during that period the courts judged cases in accordance with justice, equity and good conscience. In most cases the judges were inclined to assume that the English law was the most suitable (Twinning 1964). Even where Indian rules were available, their application by the British transformed them (Derrett 1961a: 20–22).

The focus on the written law by the British was different from the Hindu practices because usually in case of conflict between custom and *shastra*, custom overrode written text (Collector of Madura v. Mootoo Ramalinga [1868] 12 MIA 397). The British rules of evidence provided the mechanism for the disappearance of legal effectiveness of much customary law. There were many conditions necessary for custom to prevail over written law (Kane 1950: 44): the former must be proven to be immemorial ancient, uniform, invariable, continuous, certain, notorious, reasonable (or not unreasonable), peaceful, obligatory,

not immoral and not opposed to and expressing enactment or public policy.

The kinds of sanctions were also transformed. As presented in the previous section, the sanctions of the 'traditional' system took into account the whole situation of the parties. However, in the modern legal system, they were replaced by the compulsory execution of the court's decisions (Galanter 1989: 24). Gradually, the customary law was restricted and replaced by the *Dharmashastra* as interpreted by the British.

The *shastric* law was also rigidified. In order to select and interpret the relevant positions of Hindu law, the courts appointed Brahman *pundits* as law officers. However, dissatisfaction with the work of the law officers, growth of translated texts, digests, manuals prepared by the British as well as the increase of precedents from the courts themselves led eventually to the elimination of law officers in the 1860s and resulted in the general re-organization of the legal system. The common law judges undertook the task of administering law directly from the existing corpus of materials. Earlier, the *shastra* had changed and developed by successive commentaries and had maintained its flexibility by its complex and discretionary techniques of interpretation. The British administration dissipated these techniques.

By modifying the techniques of analysis of the *shastric* law, the British rendered some aspects of it more rigid. One significant change resides in the fact that the emphasis was put on the *varnas*, or four great classes into which Hindu society is theoretically divided by the *shastric* texts. *Varna* distinctions received little attention from the courts during the early years of British rule, but became a major factor in the administration of Hindu law after the courts undertook the task of administering it without intermediaries and directly from the *shastric* texts. Following with this orientation, they introduced major legal reforms, which were a mixture of modern legal philosophy and interpretation of the *shastra*.

## Legal Reforms Concerning Women's Rights during the British Period

During British colonization the courts in the Bombay urban district reinforced the ideal of *pativrata* (devoted wife). The tension during the Peshwa period between *shastric* and local customs seems to have

diminished gradually in favour of *Shastric* ideology. This ideology influenced the British in their understanding of Indian legal practices, but in other instances reforms concerning women's rights were influenced by Western thought.

Some princes and religious leaders supported the early British. Together, they supported the ban on practices like child-marriage as well as legal reforms permitting widow remarriage and sanctioned the grounds for freedom of religion. With the help of these princes and religious leaders, the British codified laws on the family. Their model was the law and customs of the rich, upper castes and landed gentry. However, some customs among certain poor communities, tribal groups and low castes were sometimes more favourable towards women. For example, many poorer communities allowed widow remarriage, some even recognized women's right to property (Agarwal 1994). On the other hand, the customs that were codified and became law were of the rich who, in their attempt to preserve their property, lineage and vast wealth, always saw women as a threat to the patriarchal family (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 30).

The British drew upon the local (upper-caste) elite and village elders to serve as informants and interpreters regarding local customs, thus introducing an elite and upper-caste (often Brahmanical) bias in recording and interpreting, as well as a tendency to homogenize existing diversity. Even in the rare cases when a systematic recording of customs was attempted, as in the case of Punjab, they were still based on information provided by village leaders and were not entirely free from such biases (Agarwal 1994: 92). Additionally, there appears to be a male respondent bias. For instance, in Punjab, while inquiring about the widow's right to seek partition of her husband's share in his joint family estate, the British found that in some districts informants denied the existence of this custom even when such partitions commonly took place in practice (Rattigan 1953: 316).

On the other hand, under pressure from the more liberal British colonizers and Indian social reformers, conservative British rulers were pressured to pass a series of laws limiting various cultural practices affecting women (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 30). In 1829, *sati* was outlawed. Twenty-seven years later, in 1856, widow remarriage was legalized. Female infanticide was banned in 1870, and two years later the Special Marriage Act was passed to allow inter-community marriages. In 1891 the age of consent was raised to 12 years. In 1929 the

Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed. Women obtained the right to vote in the province of Madras in 1921. In 1937 Hindu women were given limited rights to property. A brief presentation of two Acts directly related to widows follows.

The Widow Remarriage Act was enacted in 1856. After its adoption there were major protests from the orthodox: one petition against the Bill was signed by 37,000 people, led by Raja Radhkanta Deb and the *pundits* of Naida, Trebeni and Bansberial. Women also organized themselves and joined the debate, as did Sanskrit scholars and social reformers like Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, a social reformer who believed in the equality of men and women and advocated for women's access to education. As Liddle and Joshi (1986) point out, many people were of the opinion that the Act of 1856 had contributed to the Indian revolt of 1857.

The Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act of 1937 encountered strong opposition from the orthodox Indian members of the Central Legislative Assembly.<sup>5</sup> The Act gave Hindu widows the right to intestate succession equal to a son's share in separate property among those governed by Mitaksharav,<sup>6</sup> and in all property among those governed by Dayabhaga.<sup>7</sup> The widows also had the same interest as their deceased husbands in the undivided Mitakshara coparcenary, with the same right to claim partition as a coparcener, but she could hold this share only as a limited interest. A widow could only enjoy these rights during her lifetime, after which it went to her deceased husband's heirs. Furthermore, it excluded agricultural land. Finally, her limited rights in the deceased husband's property were subject to forfeiture on remarriage.

The 1937 Act diminished the rights of women in some communities (Agarwal 1994). This is especially true where inheritance used to be matrilineal or bilateral, such as the Garos, Kahsis and Lalungs in north-east India, as well as the Nayars, Tiyyars, Bants, Mappilas, Nangudi, Vellalars and others. Such a reverse impact of the Act is due to the fact that the British presumed that the head of the household was a male. This is an example of how legal reforms inspired by Western ideology may have had diverse effects, depending on the community in which it was implemented.

In western India there were indications of a more liberal approach to women's property rights before the British period (ibid.: 95).

Even in formal law (under the Bombay sub-school of Mitakshara) the rights of daughters in sonless families were not restricted to limited rights to property. For instance, a thirteenth-century inscription refers to a woman selling land she had inherited from her father (Altekar 1956: 238–39).

Regionally, discrepancies between the *shastras* and local customs on marriage, divorce and inheritance practices are argued to have been less severe in the Deccan region and the south, and more in the north and the east (Derrett 1968). Yet, even in the latter regions, Derrett (*ibid.*: 221) argues that deviations from *shastric* rules were tolerated: '[T]he hard core of convenience stood out against theory, and to this day some ancient customary elements have succeeded in defying *Shastric* pronouncements—even those which were never compromised by dilution and customary material.'

Based on records from the nineteenth-century, legal scholars Derrett (*ibid.*), Mayne (1900) and Roy (1911) concluded that women's property rights customarily exceeded *shastric* prescriptions in southern and western India. Mayne (1900: 41) notes, for instance, that a sister who was excluded in the Benaras and Bengal sub-schools of Mitakshara ranked high in the order of succession in Bombay Presidency, and comments:

It seems probable that the doctrine, which prevails in other districts, that women are incapable of inheriting, without a special text, has never been received at all in Western India. Women inherit there, not by reason, but in defiance, of the rules which regulate their admission elsewhere. In their case, written law has never superseded immemorial custom.

Mayne insists that such variations are not due to the existence of different schools of law, since the basic principles of the Mitakshara sub-schools were the same; rather, they reflect variations of local customs. Indeed, local customs coexisted with local royal courts and British rulings. Strangely, British reforms concerning women do not seem to have had an impact on court decisions by the end of the nineteenth century. It is true that these reforms were not implemented for a long time. What is interesting is to realize that in spite of the desire of the British to modernize the position of women in Indian society, they reinforced

the ideology of the good wife, or *pativrata*, as demonstrated in the following subsection.

### *Legal Records in Maharashtra during the Nineteenth Century*

In his article on the conception of the role of wives and the patterns of behaviour of the members within the household towards them in nineteenth-century Bombay city records, Jim Masselos (1998) demonstrates how the courts used the *shastric* concept of the ideal wife and how women resisted this view. This article is useful in understanding the history of women's court claims in Maharashtra as it shows that, over the course of the nineteenth century, the courts tried to implement the *shastric* ideal more so than under the Peshwa's courts. It is also an interesting contribution to the study of women's positions (especially concerning their roles as wives), which have never been uniformed or uncontested.

In nineteenth-century Bombay, the ideal wife, termed *pativrata*, was defined as 'the devoted wife whose entire existence is dedicated to her husband' (Leslie 1989: 1); a wife whose 'only duty' and 'main purpose in life' was service to her husband (Kapadia 1968: 169). The long-lived stereotype is found in early *puranic* texts, the laws of Manu and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, as well as in subsequent Hindu commentaries such as the *Stridharmapaddhati* written by the Brahman author Tryambaka. The influence of the latter persisted in the legal cases of the early nineteenth-century. As pointed out by Sir Gooroodass Banerjee in his Tagore Law Lectures of 1878, early nineteenth-century case-precedents re-affirmed the applicability of Hindu Law on the position that 'a woman's husband is like unto her god, and she must remain obedient to his orders and conform to his will' (Banerjee 1915: 119–20). It is true that the husband was directed to 'honour the wife' but as Banerjee pointed out: 'No system of law has ever surpassed our own in enjoining on the wife the duty of obedience to the husband and veneration for his person' (ibid.: 120). The same norms existed among Hindus, Muslims, Parsis or Indian Christians (Masselos 1998: 126).<sup>8</sup>

Articulated norms of society, entrenched in customs and precedents, included this concept of the perfect wife and of the behaviour deemed appropriate for her. The courts often enforced this view. For example, in the case of elopement it was the husband of the guilty woman, rather than the guilty woman herself, whom the courts tried and punished.

'Implicit was the view that wives were not (or could not be) independent free agents' (Masselos 1998: 121). In such a case, the court generally operated to bring home errant wives, but the caste *panchayats* also acted from time to time to maintain the forms of marital life. There is also evidence that women themselves were punished, as was the case of a Lohana wife who was expelled from her caste because she had been having a long-standing affair with another man. The husband threw her out of his house. She brought the case to court to claim alimony, but the magistrate, after saying that the old man should not have taken such a young girl as his partner, concluded that she was not entitled to economic support from her husband (*Bombay Standard*, 4 August 1859).

Sometimes neighbours or a woman's blood relatives (both males and females) would help her in case of abusive treatment by her husband, but mothers-in-law would intervene (Masselos 1998: 127–28). In the cases of conjugal violence, such as mutilation, self-mutilation or violence leading to suicide, Masselos does not report any court intervention. We then see the importance of the natal family in conflict resolution. With a low rate of court intervention, a woman could practically only count on her natal family to protect her from conjugal violence.

Although multiple forms of local and familial enforcement of the ideal wife existed, and in spite of the approval or silence of the court towards issues of violence, records of the nineteenth century also report a story of opposition against the norms and the aforementioned ideal of the wife. Numerous women broke out of the constraints of arranged marriages, either by having lovers or by trying to escape from their husband's families and set up on their own. It remains unclear how many of them successfully countered familial, caste and other social pressures, or overcame economic constraints. However, the data show that despite the internalization through cultural norms facilitating the incarnation of this ideal wife, such as early marriage and virilocal residence, some women refused to be obedient. The most famous case of that century was the Rukmabai case.<sup>9</sup> Rukmabai was married at 11 to Dadaji Bhikari, who was then 19. After the marriage, she remained in her stepfather's house for ten years. Her husband visited her from time to time, but the marriage was not consummated. In 1884, her husband sent his maternal uncle and his elder brother to bring her to his home, which she refused to do. She fought her case in court,

arguing that her husband was too poor to adequately take care of her. She was richer than him because she had inherited property as the only child of her widowed mother. She also argued that he was suffering from asthma and consumption and she was afraid of the temper of the people who lived in his house. In addition, the lawyer made the point that she had not given her consent to the marriage. In the first instance, Justice Pinhey disallowed the argument concerning poverty. However, he concluded in Rukmabai's favour, since it would be 'a barbarous, a cruel, a revolting thing to do to compel a young lady ... to go to a man whom she dislikes, in order that he may cohabit with her against her will' (Masselos 1998, 9 Bom 534). The case went on appeal the following year. Chief Justice Sir Charles Sargent reversed the Civil Court's decision. He condemned Rukmabai to prison, as recent legislation had provided means to enforce marriage rights by setting the punishment for refusing to restore conjugal rights to a maximum of six months' imprisonment. The fact that she disliked him or that she was married as a child were not appropriate justifications to annul the marriage. He clearly stated that under 'Hindu Law' the marriage of daughters was a religious duty imposed on parents and guardians. The Indian courts should not enforce the English point of view, which sees marriage as nothing but a contract to which the husband and wife must be consenting parties (*ibid.*, 9 Bom 312).

Rukmabai refused to stay with her husband and stated that she preferred to go to jail for six months. Her husband decided not to take the matter further and she had to go to prison. She later went to England where she studied to become a doctor and returned to India where she died in 1955, still unattached. This example shows that there have always been women who resisted the ideal of the wife. Courts were sometimes an indirect forum in which such women could object to a social structure, and where some judges were intent on listening and agreeing with the claims of some women. However, the courts seemed to be more imbued with a Brahmanical ideal of women than in previous times. As Masselos (1998: 129) summarizes:

Some women did manage to express an idea of free choice and assert their agency as individuals, and some established relationships of their own choice. Others resorted to the mechanisms of the state legal structures to maintain their autonomy. In whatever way they

did so, they countered explicitly the norm of the ideal, the perfect wife, although it continued as the dominant mode of thinking in regard to the structuring of domestic power.

## Summary

Under colonial rule the setting up of a British legislative and judicial machinery changed the role of traditional local councils to some degree: people could now take recourse to higher level courts if their disputes were not satisfactorily resolved by local bodies such as the village courts. The higher courts were male dominated and it was mainly the rich and powerful who were in a position to go there. At the same time, in Maharashtra important Indian social reformers worked in order to ameliorate women's status. They promoted the creation of more opportunities for women. Both social reformers and the British legal system would eventually influence the legal system of independent India.

## The Legal System in Post-colonial India

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The formation of the independent state of India was the basis for the consolidation of the modern legal system. Nowadays, while there is no single nation-wide system of caste, kinship, religion or land tenure, there is an all-India legal system that handles local disputes in accordance with uniform national standards. In 1950 the Indian Constitution established the country as a secular federal republic with a parliamentary system in the British style and a strong central government. The framers of the Constitution rejected the various proposals to construct a government along 'indigenous' lines. Instead, it established a unified judiciary covering the whole of India, with the Supreme Court as the court of final appeal in all cases.

There is an integrated system of courts that divides legislative powers between the Union and states. The Indian Constitution is quasi-federal in that it is applicable to all states. The Union Government has exclusive power to legislate on matters enumerated in List I of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, while the state governments have

exclusive jurisdiction over matters enumerated in List II of the Seventh Schedule. The Union and the states have concurrent power over matters in List III of the Seventh Schedule. Personal or customary laws in List III govern matters such as marriage, divorce, adoption, intestacy, succession, joint family and partition. Consequently, personal laws applicable to Hindus in one state need not necessarily be applicable to Hindus in other states.

The Fundamental Rights enjoined the government to be indifferent to particularistic and ascriptive characteristics such as race, religion, caste, place of birth and sex while dealing with citizens. The founders of the independent state were greatly influenced by Western legal philosophy and institutions. The most discussed borrowed legal concept has been equality. Among the three most important Fundamental Rights made available to all citizens by the Constitution are: equality before the law (Article 14), the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15) and equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16). Although the principle entrenched in the Constitution may be inspired by a Western concept of ideology associating equality with individualism, the conception of equality in India may be different.<sup>10</sup> For example, the framer of the Constitution, Ambedkar, spoke strongly in support of the individual, but he also pleaded for the recognition of the special claims of certain groups. Indeed, the Constitution gave special rights to specific groups, such as the Scheduled Tribes and Castes. According to Ambedkar, 'What was at issue was not simply equality as a right available to all individuals but also equality as a policy aimed at bringing about certain changes in the structure of society' (Béteille 1986: 126).

This differs from the more individualistic view of the Western concept of equality. The same makers of the Constitution refused to have one civil code by which women could enjoy equal rights within the family because the code might then interfere with the religious rights of various communities. This is what the British rulers said when they refused to have one civil code for India. A uniform civil code does not exist in India even today, which means that women and men are under different legislation according to their religion.

In addition to variation among religion, some laws can differ from one state to the other. It is difficult at present to identify the specificity of the legal system of Maharashtra after independence. This is partly

due to the fact that a national legal system was established and certain uniformity was sought. However, some jurisdictions were left to the states. This means that some of them have been more progressive in terms of women's rights. For example, Maharashtra has more equal succession rights for widows. Indeed, like Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra has given Hindu widows the right to inherit both acquired and ancestral property, while in the rest of India only property acquired during the lifetime of the husband is included under the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 (Agarwal 1994). Therefore, women's access to property differs throughout India.

## Women's Property Rights and Land Reforms

In spite of the importance of property, property rights are still a neglected aspect of Indian legislation, as was the case under the British. When subject to law, it is in terms of succession rights. Land issues are the most important ones concerning property rights of women, especially widows. On an individual level, widows owning land and living with their sons are more respected within their community compared to the ones who do not possess land (*ibid.*; Drèze 1990). However, legislators faced difficulties integrating the ideal of the equality of the sexes in land reforms.

Diverse forms of irrigation, adapted to various types of soil, characterize contemporary India. In addition, there is also a variety of local land systems and therefore land reforms after independence varied between states. There were a series of Land Reform Acts, but because there was a presumption that the male head of household was the titleholder, such reforms seldom took gender issues into consideration. Consequently, access to property for women varies from one state to another.

Two decades ago the issue of independent property rights for women was not admissible in public political discourses in South Asia (Agarwal 1994: 2). Despite a long evolution of land reforms, a lot remains to be done in order to enforce the rights of women. One explanation is the differences between central government policies and their enforcement by state governments (*ibid.*: 9). There are no data on the proportion of land possessed by women in India. However, ethnographic research

demonstrates that this level is low in spite of the land reforms (Agarwal 1994). Despite diverse legislative initiatives, property continues to be transmitted to women mainly at the time of marriage (generally in the form of jewellery or other types of moveable goods) and through inheritance. As Agarwal points out:

Yet the voice of the disinherited female peasant has until recently gone largely unheard, not only by policy makers but also by grass-roots groups and academics. Instead, employment is taken as the principal measure of women's economic status, obscuring what has been commonplace in measuring the economic status of men or of households: property ownership and control. (ibid.: 2)

Governmental policies in South Asia are elaborated in the context of Five Year Plans. In India the 8th Five Year Plan noted two important points regarding women and agricultural land. First, the modification of succession laws for women should provide women with an equal part of the parents' property, because this is an essential condition to ameliorate their status. Second, the planners ask the government to give 40 per cent of 'surplus land' to non-married or abandoned women as well as to widows, the balance being for the married women (ibid.: 7). These 'surplus lands' are composed of those the government has acquired from households possessing more land than the required quota of the specified ceilings. The second recommendation was the only one to be developed into specific policies. The problem is that the land surpluses only represented 0.56 per cent of arable land of the country. Approximately 21 million hectares of land still have to be distributed for a total of 185 million hectares of arable land for the whole country (Government of India 1992). This land includes, among other things, net sown area as well as land under miscellaneous tree crops and groves. According to Agarwal (1994: 7), this quantity (and quality) of land cannot solve the problems of access to land for women.<sup>11</sup>

As pointed out by Agarwal, the government does not consider property in common lands and private land the same way.<sup>12</sup> The idea of independent property rights for women was recognized, but only for private land. Consequently, women do not have the same access to property depending on whether the land is private or public (ibid.: 9). In addition, the process of land privatization in India is not equitable for women (Agarwal 1998). It was only during the 1980s that land rights for women were discussed in the context of common land

distribution (Agarwal 1994: 8). However, these redistribution programmes were based on the idea of a unitary household led by a male.<sup>13</sup> The only exceptions to this principle were in cases where there were no adult males and a woman, in general a widow, was considered head of the household. The model of a unitary household led by a male was also reproduced in communities where the traditional inheritance systems were bilateral or matrilineal.

Although land reforms were not necessarily adjusted to meet women's needs and realities, other laws were enacted to protect them. For example, the introduction of the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961, followed in 1984 by the special provision in the penal code establishing a presumption of culpability of the in-law family when a bride dies within the first seven years of her marriage. This 'group' culpability is reminiscent of the group punishments in case studies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the crime for 'dowry death' is seldom punished mainly because of complex procedures, cost of legal action, lack of awareness of women's rights and numerous local ways to solve conflicts (Bates, Unpublished).

The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, is another law aimed at the protection of women. Under this both daughters and widows have succession rights in property. More precisely, it stipulates that widows have a right to the acquired property of the deceased husband (in effect, property acquired by the husband over his lifetime). His property should be equally divided between his widow and their children. Widows seldom resort to this law. Many economic and social obstacles (such as pressures exercised by in-laws) prevent them from claiming their rights under this Act (Basu 1999).

Lack of consideration of women in land reforms, as well as in other legislations, does not correspond to the ideal of equality. It is an illustration of the clash between Western legal concepts and long-standing local practices.

### *Local Variations: Widows' Understanding of their Rights and Community Norms in Rural Maharashtra*

In case of interstate succession,<sup>14</sup> the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 confers to the widow a succession right in her husband's property. For example, if a Hindu dies leaving a son, daughter and widow, the property will be divided in three equal shares.

My fieldwork in rural Pune district (Maharashtra) was an opportunity to verify the extent to which widows are aware of their succession rights, if they consider it to be a law or tradition, how they define their rights and whether they are using the rights offered by the official system of law or respecting the local norms concerning property rights of widows. Over a period of a year (2001–02) I followed the history of thirty widows. They belonged to different age groups, castes, education and economic backgrounds; thus, these cases cannot be considered representative of one such demographic group. On the other hand, many common points may be found among the sample in their relationship to the legal system and local norms.

When I asked these widows whether they had a right to the property of their husband, the majority of them answered that it was possible after his death. Only two, who were 60 and over, told me that they did not know about their rights. Before asking them to explain what these rights were, I asked them if it was the law (*kayada*) or the tradition (*parampara*) that gives widows rights to the property of the husband. Only one of the women, around 40 years old, said she did not know. Three other respondents said that it was a tradition. All the other respondents said that it was the law, but without naming the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. When asked how they knew about the law, two answers came clearly: from television and hearsay from other villagers. In that regard, education (schooling) was never mentioned as a factor of legal awareness.

Two of the three respondents who said that it was a tradition were above 60. When I asked since when it had been a tradition, two said that it had been so since independence, and the other said that it has always been that way. The length of a tradition changes from one person to another. This differs from the British idea, as well as the modern concept, that traditions and customs should be immemorial, ancient, uniform and invariable.

The understanding of the law also differs. When the respondents were asked since when the law had been there, four different answers emerged: four or five years, ten to fifteen years, forty years and since independence. For most widows it was not clear whether they had an automatic succession right in the property of their husband or if they had to go to court. A majority of the respondents, after some hesitation, were of the opinion that it was necessary to go to court in order to get

a share. Throughout the discussions, it was never mentioned that the law divided the property between the widows and the adult children (sons and daughters). The possibility of making a will was never raised. No one said that a will could change the law and, therefore, deprive a widow from her right to property. The findings illustrate that oral transmission of the content of a law seems to play an important role in the transfer of knowledge, even though this knowledge is based on written evidence and modern values.

Diverse interpretations of the law also exist inside the legal system itself. One widow went to court in order to claim her succession rights. The court case lasted for ten years and the woman as well as her family had to spend more than Rs 25,000. The judge finally decided that she could not obtain a share in the husband's property because she had no children. The Hindu Succession Act does not stipulate that a widow can inherit only if she has children. In another case the widow was granted her rights after fifteen years and more than Rs 50,000 of expenditure. However, although the judgment was delivered in 1998, she had not received her share even after three years, the main reason being that the brothers-in-law bribed the local police to stop the execution of the court's decision. In addition, this widow and her children were subjected to different acts of intimidation from the in-laws with the aim to discourage her from claiming her rights. These two cases illustrate that the legal system is not monolithic. This is also demonstrated by appeal courts overruling the lower court's decisions and by the publication of majority and dissenting opinions by the judges which show that they fail to reach consensus among themselves. Other views on the property rights of widows may prevail over the official law. As I mentioned previously, the Hindu Succession Act is seldom used by widows. This indicates, as it was shown in the case discussed earlier, that the implementation mechanisms of this law by the judicial apparatus also varies.

Widows who did have a share of the property of the husband obtained it under various circumstances. One widow, aged between 25 and 30, had received it automatically from her parents-in-law. She stays with them and she takes care of the share of land under her name. Her children being young, she is the sole owner of that part of the land. Another widow, aged over 60, is the official owner of the house she stays in. The in-laws built this house for her many years after the death

of her husband. They also gave her her share of the husband's land. Her only child staying far away, no one else owns the property jointly with her. The third widow got her house under a special scheme for the poor. She was already a widow when the house was built and, therefore, she became the sole owner.

Some of the women interviewed were not aware who the owner of the land of their deceased husband was. One widow aged above 60 said that she did not know whether she has an official title. She said that her sons probably had equal share, but maybe only the elder son had an official title. She stays with her sons in a separate house, and wishes to cook separately from her daughters-in-law. According to her, only some of her grandsons were helping her financially. Still, due to her precarious economic situation, she is obliged—despite her age—to work in others' fields to feed herself. Another widow said that the house was in her name, a fact not confirmed by tax records. The official owner of the house was unknown.

According to a majority of the respondents, it is necessary to go to court in order to obtain a share in the husband's property. So, why do they not do so? Some of the reasons given were linked to the functioning of the legal system itself: the cost of the procedures, the excessive time taken by the courts to deliver the decision, the difficulty to get the sanction executed, and so on. They also cited social factors to explain why they did not claim their rights. As a young widow pointed out, 'It is not good to create conflict with the parents-in-law. We have to keep quiet for the sake of our children.' This reasoning is also found among the widows who do not stay with their in-laws anymore. They hope that the latter will help them later on although they have been practically abandoned by the family of their husband.

To go to court is a matter of shame for a widow and her family. Some men told me that before going to the court, the brothers of the widows try to solve matters with the family with whom they have a disagreement. Some men also said that it was their duty to help their sister if she became a widow. In practice, the widows, especially the older ones have lost contacts with their brothers or receive little help from them. If a widow finally does bring her case to court, it is not often an individual decision; it will be a familial decision. Both the financial and psychological support from the brothers and extended family are necessary in most cases to confront the legal system, although not always present.

The mere knowledge of the existence of rights does not ensure access to property. Therefore, as in the past, widows from rural areas seldom have any rights to land or other forms of property. In order to understand this continuity of practice, it is necessary to see the law not as a set of fixed rules and institutions, but as a space of social interactions (Moore 1978). The density and inter-connections of social relationships surrounding disputing parties appears to be a critically important measure of the way in which law has intervened in everyday life. Consequently, it is very important to analyze the social context of a dispute and the influence of the context on the legal process (Nader 1965, 1975). It is also necessary to look at the 'harmony ideology' of a community, which is to say, the preference of an agreement over a fight (Nader 1990).

## Conclusion

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During each major period of the Indian legal history, regional and local variations of women's rights have been reported. Archival records also show that some women have resisted the Brahman ideology of *pativrata* and that the courts have sometimes protected them. The contemporary Indian legal system has also stipulated through some legislation that women should be protected. However, at this point women's access to property is still quite precarious in spite of the ideology of equality entrenched in the Indian Constitution. This illustrates that modern values can not override multiple concepts of justice, rights and duties in non-Western societies.

The interplay between various rulers' definitions of laws, local norms and customary dispute resolutions instances in pre-British colonial India created a situation of legal pluralism that does not correspond to the idea of traditional societies characterized by the absence of laws and fixed norms of behaviour. The British reinterpretation of 'traditional law' as being the *Dharmashastras* did not take into account the complexity of the pre-British Indian legal system. The introduction of a modern legal system by the British did not put an end to all Hindu customary practices, while sometimes jeopardizing the existing rights to property of Hindu women living in diverse communities. In terms of women's rights, such evidence does not demonstrate the 'superiority'

of Western legal systems. Post-colonial Indian legislators built the legal system on the heritage left by the British. At the same time, modern ideology such as the concept of equality was introduced into the framework of laws, while variations, according to religion and states, were maintained. In addition, the lack of implementation of the few laws aimed at protecting women encouraged the perpetuation of local practices and maintained the possibility of the re-interpretation of women's rights. This is clear in the study of widows in rural Maharashtra. Widows' awareness of their succession rights in their husband's property may be seen as law or tradition. However, among widows these two notions have different meanings. Also, the local norms of widows' access to property influence the possibility of these women getting their share. This creates a state of plurality within which modern values and traditions are re-interpreted in order to facilitate the acceptance of widows by their community. Not one period of the Indian legal system can be characterized by uniformity and respect of modern norms. Instead, modern values, traditions and customary practices have been subject to change and variation at all levels of the society.

## Notes

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1. The population of the city during that period ranged between 70,000 and 100,000.
2. The *kotwal's* papers are monthly account books that record the amounts collected as fines from the parties judged as offenders in the *kotwal's* police stations (*cavdis*).
3. The story reported by Wagle does not indicate who sold her and to whom.
4. Extracts from the Peshwa Daftar in Gune (1953), Sardesai (1934a, 1934b) and Vad and Parasnis (1908). The Peshwa Daftar is a product of British colonial order. The British seized the Peshwa's records and used them to create a central archive for documents from previous overlords. By controlling the knowledge of the past, they were able to reinterpret religious customs, legal systems, agricultural practices and taxation policies. The records do not present a full description of legal cases. The general characteristics of the documents are that they consist of a summary of the decision accompanying the receipt of a fine (Waters 1998: 4) and a formulaic agreement to pay the fine (*karar kela*), and sometimes an

agreement to perform penance of other rituals. The sentences are often incomplete and the description may consist of a string of phrases. The documents also state the names of key individuals that are often named in familial and relational terms.

5. The Central Legislative Assembly was established in 1935.
6. The Mitakshara is a Hindu legal treatise on inheritance written in the 12th century. The main principle is the inheritance by birth. The concept of joint family property implies that the sons have an equal birth right with their father in the ancestral property. No individual coparcener can claim that he owns a specific share in the property until all the coparceners decide to of the partition of the land.
7. Under the Dayabhaga, another Hindu law treatise inheritance principle, the father remains the sole owner of the acquired and ancestral property and there is no concept of birth right. Hence, contrary to the Mitakshara, the father can take decisions regarding the ancestral land without the consent of his sons. Also dating of the 12th century, the Dayabhaga this treatise differs from the Mitakshara which was already prevalent in most part of India.

At the time of the establishment of the Modern British Indian courts, the inheritance principle of the Mitakshara were prevailing in most parts of India except in the Bengal region as well as in Assam. The inheritance principles of both treatises were modified by the Hindu Succession of 1956 and the 2005 amendment of this law.

8. For example, although Islam permitted divorce and viewed marriage as a social contract, the domestic roles of women were much the same as those of their sisters of other faiths. This is illustrated in the similarity of the experiences of Muslim women in their families and women of other religions (Masselos 1998: 126).
9. *Dadaji Bhikaji v. Rukmabai*, 19 and 21 September 1885, 9 Bom 529.
10. For details on the debate over the equation of individualism and equality, see the article by André Béteille (1986).
11. The situation is similar in the rest of South Asia. In Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, Five Year Plans do not mention the need for women to have land and these do not express the intention to enforce a right to property for them. The countries insist principally on the need to ameliorate women's education and to facilitate their entry into the workplace (Agarwal 1994: 7–8).
12. Reforms did not pay attention to the redistribution of urban property, whether it was land or not.
13. The same goes for the programmes of Pakistan and Sri Lanka (in the 1950s and 1960s), as well as the Bangladesh programme in 1970, which were also based on the idea of a unitary household led by a male.
14. Intestate successions means a succession other than under a will.

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## Part 2

POWER OF

ORALITY

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# INTRODUCTION

EDITORS

As a response to cultures shaped, spread and enforced by communication technologies or so-called mainstreams, 'popular' cultures often happen to be advocated and called to display alternative forms of communication pregnant with more genuinely humane content. Against the industrial supply of 'mass' symbolic products, we focus once again on them for purpose of hopefully discovering ways of creative and native initiatives to be possibly followed. In the previous volume we already took cognizance of oral mythical narratives as a people's history of sorts. Indian myths (Poitevin 2001) by and large are cognitive discourses that authoritatively deal with fundamental queries such as community status, collective identity, social order, common good, gender, power, and so on. We presented practices of reappropriation of narratives prompted by purposes of collective recognition, political mobilization, cultural awareness and social distinction. Further, we showed that human groups try to fulfil the wishes of inner cohesion and outer distinction in elaborating highly sophisticated and 'discursive' systems of work relations and health practices transmitted by word of mouth only.

We are now going to deal with the epistemological foundations and the methodological implications of such practices in a perspective of critical cultural anthropology. On what grounds can communities legitimately vindicate such functions for their myths? To what extent can they actually claim for their heritage of ancient narratives a capacity of social consolidation, nowadays, in a deeply transformed socio-cultural environment?

A comparable shift towards the resources of orality has already been taking place for the past thirty years among historians. They used to

rely only on written documents from record rooms, museums and official archives as the only authentic sources for writing history, but now find substance in popular oral narratives, collective memory, common sense, shared representations, mentalities (Ariès 1988: 167–90; Hinchman and Hinchman 1997: 7–50). They recognize these oral testimonies as valid sources for constructing people's past history and identifying their present identity (Carr 1986). If the memory—mental, oral or written—is the 'raw material of history', the fish-tank for historians to draw from' (Le Goff 1988: 10–11) then, 'In most of cultures without script, and in many sectors of our own society, the accumulation of records in memory partakes of every day life' (Goody 1977: 3–5).

Anthropologists point to the fact that among populations without script the significant role of collective memory consists in giving a seemingly historical foundation to the existence of the ethnic community. Memory tends to equate myth and history, while narrating the story of the origins, the 'mythic charter' of tradition (Malinovsky cited in Le Goff 1988: 112–13). Anthropologists also stress the fact that, contrary to what is generally believed, in societies without script, memory is not a word-for-word transmission. It operates with variations and mnemonic procedures happen to be rare. A word-for-word repetition is even rarely perceived as necessary (Goody 1977); this mnemonic technique would apparently be a practice related to writing, while societies without script grant more freedom to memory:

In these societies, the operational modality of the collective memory seems to be 'a generative reconstruction' and not a mechanical memorizing. In Goody's (1977: 34) opinion, 'the support of the rememoration is not to be found at the superficial level where the word for word operates, neither at the level of those deep structures that many mythologists unearth....' It seems on the contrary that the important role is played by the narrative dimension and other factual structures. (Le Goff 1988: 114)

While historians are confronted with epistemological queries regarding the way they should process these sources and relate to them (Canary and Kozicki 1978; White 1987), human collectives are busy shaping their identities with the wealth of symbolic forms that they have been carrying for generations (Ricoeur 1983; Singer 1997). Narratives transmitted by word of mouth are one of the means of passing on

information in societies where the oral tradition is the functional channel of communication on a large scale.

Two attributes are characteristic of those straightforward discursive performances. First, they are subject to 'constant adjustment; myths from earlier periods are recast in conformity with the social assumptions of later periods'. Second, the question is not of validating them through ascertaining their historical authenticity; it is conversely to probe the reasons for their acceptance as grounds for social validation of beliefs, rituals, values, norms and particular historical actions.

In a historical tradition the themes of myths act as factors of continuity.... Myths made the past intelligible and meaningful, but it was intelligibility and meaningfulness which related to the present, for the continuity of myth is largely with reference to the present ... As validating charters myths have a close connection with social organization, not only representing as they do, the assumptions about the past but also underpinning the social relations of the present. (Thapar 1984: 296–97)

The chapters in this section display a variety of discursive collective memories—narratives, poems and melodies—maintained as communicational foundation for communities in search of cohesion, identity and ground for conflictual strategies. They demonstrate how an oral heritage can be reactivated under the challenge of defiant forces and prove to be a powerful symbolic asset for assertion and dissent. They try to answer queries about the extent and modes of this power of orality, a secret inherited from traditional cohesive societies: How were people's narratives, poetry and melodies heard and transmitted, and to what extent can they circulate again? How do they piece groups or communities together?

## Terrains of Rejuvenation

Depending on the actors and contexts, the discursive dimension may be carried by narratives or songs. The first three contributions address more particularly the following questions: How does one listen to narratives or songs and make sense of them? What would be the ways of a fair 'reading' doing justice to the myths and songs themselves?

What would be the conditions of their ethically sound reappropriation? How can one eschew several pitfalls such as communal jingoism, sterile preservation, political manipulation, imaginary empathy, arbitrary reading, subjective fusion, epistemologically alien hermeneutical references, and so on?

The first chapter, 'The Donkey, a Mirror of Self-identification in Myths from the Vaār Community' by Guy Poitevin, is a minute study of three narratives which have been collected from a marginalized Indian community, the Vaārs, traditionally earth-diggers, stone-breakers and stone-cutters in central India and Maharashtra. The rationale behind the method which mainly draws upon linguistic theories and practices is vindicated with reference to the present function and status of the narratives in the communities to which they belong.

The chapter starts by systematically displaying the ways and procedures of a methodological experiment. It projects epistemological issues which confront cultural studies in India and especially those scholars who concern themselves with folk narrative traditions. Issues are raised in reference to those avenues brilliantly traced out by Jean-Pierre Vernant, in historical studies of ancient Greece, Emile Benveniste in linguistics, Claude Levi-Strauss (1960) in anthropology and Paul Ricœur (1983, 1990) in hermeneutics. The status of traditional narratives as asset to communicative strategies to build up communities, yesterday as well as today, and the relevance or otherwise of such a cultural heritage in our present times depends upon hermeneutical stands, which are spelt out in the first part. Culture as diachronic confrontation of modern critique with past traditions rests upon a decision with respect to such epistemological stands, unless such traditions be simply thrown aside as anachronistic and merely kept in archives. Then the three oral narratives are thoroughly processed following a method the categories and procedures of which are first explicitly spelt out.

The second chapter, 'Memory and Social Protest: The Myth of Chuharmal in the Bhojpur Area' by Badri Narayan, focuses on the reappropriation for socio-political purposes of the popular myth of Chuharmal owned as a 'hero' by the lower castes of central Bihar. The chapter deals with those processes which tend to capture an ethnic memory in order to develop altogether different symbolic systems of social communication. Naturally, this capture is resisted by the heirs of the living mythic memorial who make all attempts to save and

preserve the memory of their hero, a strategic asset of their survival. The process is projected with reference to the category of social memory construed as agency of collective identity.

Obviously, the potentialities of traditional and ethnic memory happen to be harnessed to serve objectives of dominance as well as defiance. Memory equally proves to be an asset of subjection and rebellion. The relationship between power and memory is not univocal at all. Ambivalence and ambiguity are deeply imbedded in the agendas. Establishment and mainstream anxiously use people's memories for their ends, possibly prompted by a wish to 'nip in the bud' the resistance potential of people's memory perceived as a frightening force. But people may as well harness their collective symbolic heritage against attempts of control and hegemony. The narrative, in the eye of the storm, is intensely contested. Its subversive potential is subject to opposite drives, which sometimes erases its record from people's memory, sometimes transplants distorted memories which smother its adverse propensities, sometimes simply reconstruct and conveniently reinterpret memorial heritages according to alien objectives and aesthetic senses.

The third chapter, 'Say it in Singing! Prosodic Patterns and Rhetorics in the Performance of Grindmill Songs' by Bernard Bel, Geneviève Caelen-Haumont and Hema Rairkar, provides new insights into the 'act of singing' and its likeness to the 'act of speaking' in terms of the reappropriation of a discourse and the communication of its emotional content. Their study is based on detailed analyses of improvisational performances in two remote cultural-linguistic contexts: spontaneous dialogues in French on a preset canvas of discourse, and singing at the grindmill in Marathi language. The authors' contention is that the capture of meaning at multiple levels demands a personal emotional involvement on the part of the speaker/singer. The concern of the performers is that the message conveyed in the performance needs to be heard, understood and believed. To achieve this, they need to reappropriate the original text and reshape it, syntactically and semantically, so that it reflects implicit personal and collective values.

The tools for this reappropriation are found in the prosodic structures (time and pitch) underlying the performance of either speech or singing. The subjective dimension is found in the way a performer will sometimes adhere to, other times contradict, the intonative pattern imposed by the pragmatic and linguistic structures of speech production, or the tonal structure of a tune. The study suggests that this game

of submission and resistance is the mirror of an identification process enacted by the opposition between collective and individual values. Submission to the conventional pattern brings about a sense of community cohesiveness, a social heritage; in other words, an invariant of collective values and memories that prove the existence of the performer as a member of the group. At the opposite (and simultaneously), the performer needs to depart from convention and express individual values as the carriers of his/her emotions. It is typically the 'space of variability' in speech and singing.

## Assets of Dissent

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Among populations who are not conversant with books and writing, oral traditions operate as references for building up communities of thought, conduct and action. When these communities happen to be maintained in a state of subalternity, their oral traditions may be expected to reflect in ways specific to each of them the uneasy, ambivalent, ambiguous, confused or possibly contrasted and even conflictual rapports that cannot but prevail between internalized dominant systems of representations and autonomous symbolic reconstructions.

The chapters in this section present the secular and exclusively feminine tradition of grindmill songs on the basis of a reference corpus of 60,000 distichs established in western Maharashtra. The practice of singing while grinding at dawn is widely observed all over the Indian subcontinent. Songs of the grindmill have been extensively collected and used for activities of cultural action and community organization in rural Maharashtra since 1983 by the peasant women animators of the Village Community Development Association (VCDA).<sup>1</sup> Let us stress the fact that we are provided with a model for research and action, which hardly leaves room to processes of dominance of a research expert with scholarly competence over common folk deprived of academic authority. The validity and relevance of the research in this model is a function of the quality, equality and intensity of the communication processes, which take place in the research design and research procedures themselves.

The three contributors discuss their experience of research and action from an insider's perspective. In 'Grindmill Songs: A Reference of

Autonomous Self-Insight', Hema Raikar emphasizes the importance of this tradition as an authoritative reference for peasant women to ascertain their statements and the authenticity of their testimonies. The challenge of research-action is to establish the continuity between an inherited collective self-memory and a modern critical self-assessment. As a self-generating process of knowledge leading to appropriate action, this reflexive self-investigation needs to be carried out collectively. This reappropriation and re-activation, namely, deconstruction and reconstruction of the tradition of grindmill songs is accomplished by its very heirs. From its outset it worked as a potent communication vehicle among peasant women (Poitevin and Raikar 1996) and it further conquered a legitimacy and authenticity that make it an effective contribution towards maintaining and reinforcing community bonds.

The actors' point of view is reflected by Tara Ubhe in 'From Grindmill Songs to Cultural Action'. She shows how the performance and recollection of grindmill songs in the course of village meetings and discussions helped the participants, especially older women, open up their mind and express their feelings. Further, she advocates the sharing and critical reassessment of this genuine anthropological knowledge with professors and scholars concerned with women studies, folk culture, popular literature, oral social history, subaltern studies, cultural anthropology, and so on.

In 'A Reactivated Performance Capacity', Kusum Sonavne shows how the tradition of songs can be reactivated as a congenial medium of exchange and creation of knowledge among deserted women. It indeed enables those who composed and carried them down the ages to meet the challenges of the present. This personal and direct account brings concepts of valorization, reassessment, reinterpretation, cultural action, revitalization, and so on, to the centre of the debate. Here is an instance of systematic reappropriation of an immense and immemorial heritage of symbolic communication to build up anew a collective women's assertion in continuity with the past. This is carried out through efforts of critical self-investigation and re-evaluation by the direct and legitimate heirs of that tradition at the intersection of normative systems of symbolic communication which provides an explanation for their condition of desertion, and autonomous articulation of spontaneous urges, feelings and representations.

## Note

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1. The VDCA is a non-governmental organization in Pune district that supports activities of people's education, cultural awakening and social action among the lower sections of village communities, in particular those of the spontaneous local groups associated with the term 'Poor of the Mountain'.

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**2.1**

***Terrains***

***of***

***Rejuvenation***

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# 4

## THE DONKEY: A MIRROR OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION

GUY POITEVIN

Three examples of structural analysis and thematic interpretation of oral myths that incorporate the personage of the donkey as a significant ‘agent’ or ‘actant’ (Ricœur 1971: 43) are submitted with the view to mainly project points of method. My conviction is that we cannot inconsiderately use, let alone abuse, at will any so-called ‘folk’ cultural form even for commendable cultural or development purposes. Reappropriation should not be manipulation or mere instrumental utilization, leave aside misuse, but fair reinterpretation grounded in a semantically safe reassessment. A fruitful and legitimate interaction of past and present cultures raises issues of methodological transparency, that is to say, proven procedures of validation.

It is with such questions relating to modes of cultural interaction across disconnected periods of time that we give an account of our way to read, assess and interpret today three Indian oral myths in which the Vaḍār—traditionally a community of stone-workers, nowadays road workers and agricultural labourers—deal with their carrier, the donkey. We shall not debate definitions (Thapar 1984: 294–325) and hermeneutics of myths, though our method obviously has its own assumptions, which we shall spell out in the course of demonstration whenever necessary. We mainly mean to show the grounds of our attempts of interpretation.

## Method and Perspectives

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### The Myth: A Rational Act of Speech

My first assumption is that myth is an oral narrative, a social form of symbolic communication. The approach accordingly finds its starting point, ground and legitimacy in the linguistic status of the oral narrative as discourse (Thompson 1981: 132–36). The first thing to be done in this regard is to rescue the myth as act of speech.

In the Marathi language the words *kathā* and *daṇṭakathā* are used to indicate what is called myth in English: *Daṇṭakathā* is commonly perceived and defined as: ‘A popular story; an inauthentic tradition; a legend’ (Molesworth 1986: 400) or as, ‘*lokkathā*, a popular narrative; an imaginary *kālpanik* story *goṣṭa*, a story deprived of scientific standard *śāstrapramāṇvirahit* or circulated by word of mouth *tonḍātonḍ, cālat ālel, goṣṭa*’ (Date and Karve 1988: 1609).

The word has no entry as a compound name in the Sanskrit–English dictionary of Sir Monier Monier-Williams (1999: 247). But both its parts come from Sanskrit, each of them carrying the following present meanings: *daṇṭa* being a tooth, an elephant’s tusk, the peak of a mountain, a projecting portion on the side, a knee (Molesworth 1986: 400), and *kathā* meaning:

1. A feigned story; a tale, fable, apologue.
2. A legend of the exploits of some god related with music and singing, and with embellishing marvels invented at the moment—forming a public entertainment.
3. Used in the sense of importance, weight, significance ....
4. Speech, saying, telling (ibid.: 132).

The Sanskrit root verb *kath* means ‘to converse with any one, to tell, relate, narrate, report, inform, speak about, declare, explain, describe; to announce, show, exhibit, bespeak, betoken; to order, command; to suppose, state’ (Monier-Williams 1899: 247). The Sanskrit noun *kathā* accordingly is reported with various connotations or forms of stating, mentioning or talking: ‘conversation, speech, talking together, talk, story, tale, fable, story-telling, disputation, fiction, feigned story, narrative, discourse, relation, narration’, any articulated speech which may be a narrative, a dialogue or a statement about a project.

Drifts from an initial meaning of ‘act of speech’ to ‘imaginary story’ semantically set apart the Marathi *kathā* or *dañtakathā* from the Sanskrit *kathā*. Similarly, in Ancient Greece between the eighth and the fourth century BC, *muthos* happened to be set apart from and opposed to *logos* by philosophers and historians (Vernant 1988: 196–217). In both cases the result is a notion of myth as ‘tale’ for entertainment, ‘legend’ for embellishment, a ‘fiction’ deprived of authenticity and truth value. Our duty as social scientists is to rescue our Indian *dañtakathā* from this logical wreckage perpetrated by a will to hegemony of modern arrogant epistemologies. Forms of rationality are as multiple as the various cognitive strategies devised by humans to explore, order and rule over the different physical and social realms of reality. Oral narrative as an act of speech is an act of cognition, one form among many of human discursive rationality and symbolic communication.

## Oral Narratives with Us as Pure Text

The main features of those traditional forms of symbolic exchange that we collect nowadays from Vaḍār communities in Maharashtra are the following.

1. *Universal concrete.* The narrative as a discursive form operates through concatenation of events which are always concrete representations apprehended through sensibility and not intellect. The narrative as act of cognition is, therefore, concretely universal, as it constructs its logical operations with sensory objects and incorporates its cognitive patterns in sequences of events.
2. *Cognitive discourse of a community.* For a narrative to exist as a myth, a community is needed to reappropriate, transform and re-edit it to meet its general cognitive, ideological and moral needs. Individuals utter stories, events, accounts, dreams, fancies, etc., of which a few only are reshaped and turned into *dañtakathā*, namely, those with an exemplary value for the community; private, casual, inadequate and personal aspects are levelled or erased. These narratives are community discourses and not acts of speech by an individual projecting mental states, feelings or worries. Our narratives have neither psychological

nor moral value. They differ in this respect from tales and edifying legends.

3. *Patrimony subsisting as pure oral text only* (Ricoeur 1971: 48–49). Most of the time nowadays the Vaḍār narratives reach us—and even members of the community—as pure oral texts only, and no more as events of discourse of speakers sharing a meaning with an audience in a given historical context.
4. *Codified linguistics documents*. The narrators do not change their words nor construct them at will. None of them would ever consider them his/her own utterances. Their texts are stereotyped, immutable sentences reported as received, fixed linguistic data to be transmitted as intangible patrimony. The narratives run from a beginning to an end as a totality to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted.
5. *A signifying totality*. Each and every narrative is a discourse that stands on its own, for itself, significant by itself, at any point of time, irrespective of whether it makes sense to the listener or reader. There is no point in looking for an original and true version to which available narratives should be compared for assessment of their reliability. The relevance and import of each narrative is not to be construed against such derivative processes through tracing it back to its historical source. Each of them is to be taken as seriously as any other one (Lévi-Strauss 1988: 196), though it remains true that a narrative is the totality of its versions, derivations and variations. The narrative unfolds itself, but nobody unfolds it.
6. *De-contextualized, autonomous text*. We cannot make sense of our myths through direct identification of the things spoken about as part of a situation that we would belong to and share with the author as one of his/her interlocutors. They reach us essentially as de-contextualized texts. We cannot point out the audience nor the contexts that our texts mean to address. We are, therefore, left only with the ‘world of the text’ (Thompson 1981: 139–44). This means a modality of autonomy for the text with respect to the elusive intention of the author. Positively, this emancipation means that the ‘world of the *text* may explode the world of the *author*’ (ibid., 139. Emphasis mine). The text ‘is the projection of a world, the proposal of a mode of

being-in-the-world, which the text discloses in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive references' (Thompson 1981: 192).

7. *Free for a new referential value.* A de-contextualized text makes room for a re-contextualization in new situations. Our reading of the myths will be an attempt of that sort. The impossibility of putting ourselves in the originary relation of speaking to hearing, apparently a serious handicap as it cuts the myth off from an irretrievable condition of dialogical discourse, actually places it as text at our entire disposal. Distancing and objectification of the myth as text become the condition of possibility of our interpretation, and of another regime of cultural confrontation and inter-cultural interbreeding.
8. *The sense and the reference.* The emergence of that extended regime of symbolic communication can be referred to Frege and Ricoeur's distinction, in a proposition, between the sense and the reference (Clark 1991: 132). The sense is the ideal object that the proposition intends, and hence is purely immanent in discourse. The reference is the truth value of the proposition, its claim to reach reality. The fact is that the referential reality of the myth is not of the same level as the empirical reference of the ordinary language. The myth aims at a more fundamental truth than any *descriptive, constative, didactic discourse*. The abolition of a first-order reference is the condition of possibility for the freeing of that second-order reference, which reaches the world not only at the level of manipulable objects, but at the level that Husserl (Housset 2000) designated by the expression *Lebenswelt* (life-world) and Heidegger by the expression 'being-in-the-world'.

In short, four characteristics sever the myth as text from the initial act of speech: first, a shift from the event of saying to the meaning of what is said; second, severance of the latter from the speaker's intent; third, instead of a dialogical relation, an inter-cultural dialectic through a text available to any audience; and fourth, instead of a reality shared as reference, new referential dimensions inaugurated by processes of interpretation.

These four characteristics make room for a new and wider horizon of symbolic exchange and cultural encounter in indefinitely new spaces

of interbreeding escaping the time and space boundaries of the initial speech event, through a process of communicational reinterpretation. This process may be understood with reference to basic principles of linguistic.

## A Model of Interpretation

### *Language as a Double System of Significance*

According to Benveniste (1974: 64), language operates through two different modes of significance, the semiotic mode<sup>1</sup> and the semantic mode<sup>2</sup> (Ricœur 1969: 64–97): first, the significance of the words that are particular and formally distinct signs or units, and, second, the significance of the sentence or phrase that refers to a given situation as to speak is always to ‘speak about’, in other words make statements about some reality that stands beyond the language. In brief, Ricœur (1969: 92–93) states that the meaning of a phrase is its *idea*, whereas the meaning of a word is its *use*.

A semantics of the sentence is distinct from a semiotics of the sign: the semiotic—the sign—stands by itself and ought to be recognized; the semantic—the phrase—ought to be understood. Both of them represent the two fundamental modes of the linguistic function, namely, to the semiotic the role of signifying and to the semantic the role of communicating. The distinction of meaning and reference is equally essential and a matter of common experience. One may, for instance, perfectly understand the meaning of the words while remaining absolutely unable to understand the meaning that results from the set of words pieced together to construct a sentence and a discourse. The meaning of a phrase is the idea that the sentence articulates; the referent of the phrase is the state of affairs that prompts the sentence, the situation in which the discourse takes place or refers to. Such circumstances are always particular. The phrase is always a singular event of speech.

This double essential distinction is consonant with a concept of myth as a combination of elements pieced together as to construct a meaning of a different order. Myth is a set of morphemes, lexemes, semantemes, phrases, sets of phrases and mythemes, which as a whole gives the elements that it borrows from nature, social life, psychological experience, imaginary representations, historical events, etc., a meaning

different from the one that any of these elements may have by itself as a separate unit.

Two cognitive strategies are, therefore, possible in front of the myth as text. The first strategy is a structural approach; it perceives all the elements as semiotic signs defined by their internal and oppositional relations; the logic of these oppositional relations yields the first meaning of the text. I call it *structural semantics*. The second strategy is directed towards our self-understanding based on the narrative as a set of phrases or discourse, which makes statements about referential realities standing beyond the language of the narrative. I call it *thematic semantics*.

### *Narrative as Structure, Auto-explanation: First Cognitive Strategy*

A structural analytical perspective treats the text as a wholly world-less and autonomous self-reference. It is sought to be explained in terms of its internal relations, its structures. This explanatory attitude is based on a linguistic model for which there are no absolute terms, but only relations of mutual dependence between the terms. The text has no 'outside', but only an 'inside', with no transcendent aim. This attitude is justified by the myth as pure text deprived of the double transcendence of discourse towards the world and towards someone. This allows for a linguistic structural model being applied to the text.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis actually proceeds through segmentation of the elements and the interconnection of actions into a unique structured totality through different levels hierarchically fitting into one another. I call these levels by various names: mythemes, sequence, round, part, cluster of actions, etc. Their series stands as a mutual imbrication or interlocking. After Lévi-Strauss, I call mythemes large internal components,<sup>4</sup> a 'bundle of relations'. 'Only in the form of combinations of such bundles do the constituent units acquire a signifying function' (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 211). This function is simply the 'arrangement or disposition of mythemes, in short, the structure of the myth' (Thompson 1981: 155). I shall use the word 'sense' to refer to this structure as its internal significance, obtained, once the deconstruction into elements had been achieved, through a structural reconstruction of all the unitary sets. It spells out the logic of the linear sequence of events.

The diachronic layout of the components—the order of interlinking—can be compared to the progressive unfolding of a dramatic performance till a satisfactory resolution or equilibrium is reached. As in a play, the end of an act or sequence often appears as a switching point to which the next one is linked by some imperative nexus. The latter is often an inversion or an abrupt reversal of situation, as if the whole story had to develop and progress through a chain of ups and downs linked to one another by an internal logical necessity. ‘To explain a narrative is to grasp this entanglement, this fleeting structure of interlaced actions.... The application of this technique ends up by “dechronologising” the narrative, in a way that brings out the logical underlying narrative time’ (Thompson 1981: 156).

*Myth as Meaning, Self-understanding:  
Second Cognitive Strategy*

The second cognitive strategy seeks insight and understanding with reference to reality beyond the discourse. The narrative as discourse shapes a world of its own not for itself, but for sharing a vision with interlocutors. The intention of the discourse is fulfilled only with the understanding by someone of what it signifies about something. Beyond and through its very internal sense—an a-temporal object, cut off from historical moorings and pertaining to a sphere of pure ideality—the narrative as a new event of discourse may always project ahead meanings and historical messages. The text of the myth is then no more its object, only its mediation.

Our question now is: How does one understand what the text means to tell us after we read what it says? How does one lift the suspense that intercepts the references of the text? For the reflective philosophy of P. Ricoeur, the understanding of the meaning of a text culminates in self-understanding.<sup>5</sup> An approach labelled ‘appropriation’ leads to that achievement. ‘By “appropriation”, I understand this: that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself’ (ibid.: 158).

Three distinctive but correlated notions signal three stages of processing: (a) the notion of appropriation as counterpart of the timeless distancing that turns a myth into a text; (b) the notion of structure or

sense of the myth as a semantic mediation directly instrumental to the recovery of its meaning and (c) the notion of signification implied in the process of self-understanding once the latter is construed as a modality of textual interpretation.

The realization of the text as discourse gives the myth dimensions similar to those of speech, as it inaugurates an inter-cultural interbreeding.

Appropriation, application to the life situation of the reader, *here and now* ‘makes one’s own what was initially *alien*’ on account of temporal and cultural estrangement. It is an enactment of the semantic possibilities of the text through ‘fusing textual interpretation with self-interpretation’. The latter is objectively grounded in the statics of the text, and not on the author’s psychological experience. To interpret is to comply with the injunction of the text, ‘to follow the path of thought opened up by the text’. Interpretation is not an act *on* the text, but the ‘act *of* the text’.<sup>6</sup> ‘To understand *oneself* is to understand oneself *in front of the text*’ (Thompson 1981: 113).

This is in contrast on the other hand to the tradition of the Descartes’s *cogito* and to the pretence of the subject to know itself by immediate intuition. It must be said that we understand ourselves only by the long *détour* of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works. The extent of estrangement required in the study of myths points to ‘the ruin of the *ego*’s pretention to constitute itself as ultimate origin’. The key to the constitution of the subject is not with the subject but with the matter of the text’ (Descarte 2007).

## Cognitive Mapping and Re-contextualization

My analytical procedures consist in identifying the variety of cognitive processes that monitor its composition, shape its sequences and construct its overall configuration. The semantic structural reading is schematically presented in Table 4.1, which answers the question: ‘What is happening?’ A set of classificatory markers given in Box 4.1 allows for a synthetic reading of each narrative. The *title* attempts to summarily locate the *subject* of the narrative. The category *theme* tries to define the central issue to which the narrative addresses itself as a short answer to the question: ‘What is the narrative dealing with?’

**Table 4.1**  
**Synoptic Table: Semantic 1 Structural (Vdr-02)**

| <i>Vāyu—<br/>Hanumān</i>                                                                      | <i>The earth: Space of<br/>conflict and stake</i>                                                                                                                      | <i>Sun god Sūrya and all<br/>gods in heaven</i>                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hanumān when taking<br>birth jumps to swallow<br>the sun.                                     | Hanumān falls on earth.                                                                                                                                                | Gods afraid; request<br>Indra to knock<br>Hanumān down.<br>All the gods are furious<br>with Vāyu.                                                                                                         |
| <b>2nd sequence: Retaliation</b>                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Vāyu decides to keep alive<br>only the donkey grazing<br>under the tree below his<br>hideout. | The donkey is allowed<br>to keep grazing under<br>the tree below Vāyu's<br>hideout provided he<br>keeps the secret of<br>Vāyu's hideout; the<br>donkey gives his word. | Śaṅkar travels and<br>wanders all around<br>on earth in search of<br>Vāyu .He discovers<br>the donkey grazing<br>under the tree, at<br>ease; he suspects the<br>donkey of knowing<br>whereabouts of Vāyu. |
| <b>3rd sequence: Appeasement</b>                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Hideout revealed by the<br>donkey.                                                            | Donkey blows Vāyu's cover<br>out of self-conceit, elated<br>at the idea of having<br>Śaṅkar <i>Pinḍa</i> in his hoof<br>forever.                                       | Śaṅkar pets the donkey,<br>humbly entreats him,<br>holding his feet and<br>offering his <i>Pinḍa</i> as<br>a permanent mark.                                                                              |
| Vāyu is placated; appeased,<br>he honours the demand<br>of Śaṅkar; reconciliation<br>follows. | Śaṅkar's demand that life<br>and creation be saved<br>is granted when Vāyu<br>obliges.                                                                                 | Śaṅkar makes an<br>apology to Vāyu and<br>begs pardon in the<br>name of all the gods.                                                                                                                     |
| <b>4th sequence: Malediction</b>                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Vāyu remains terribly<br>enraged with the donkey;<br>he vengefully curses him.                | The curse on the donkey is<br>a sanction for breaking<br>his word: life-long hard<br>work as a load-carrier.                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

*Semanteme* gives the specific idioms or lexemes of the narrative: they may be representations, objects, concepts, events, imaginary figures, etc. We possibly sort them out with four concepts: *actant*, *space*, *action* and *function*. *Mytheme* gives the stereotyped narrative units used by the discourse. *Logic mode* tries to identify the logic structures which shape the texture of the whole text and give it consistency.

**Box 4.1**  
**Cognitive Mapping (Vdr-02)**

*Title:* Vāyu stops blowing to avenge Hanumān: life vanishes. When he surrenders to Śaṅkar he curses the donkey who disclosed his hiding place.

*Semanteme:*

- Actant: Vāyu, Sūrya, Śaṅkar Hanumān, Indra, all gods, donkey;
- Space: earth, heaven; tree: upon, down;
- Action: give birth, swallow, graze, jump, club, hide, toil, wander; blame, curse, ask pardon, make apology;
- Function: fright, anger, appeasement, curse, life extinction on earth.

*Mytheme:*

- Jump to swallow a deity.
- Crowd of gods: impotency and scare.
- The weak, pivot of power games.
- The weak, scapegoat and victim.

*Hermeneutics:*

- Narrator's insight: The narrative is meant to explain the donkey's plight as a curse.
- Analytic category 1: Contest and trial of the gods' ascendancy over life on earth: the balance is restored.
- Analytic category 2: Life on earth and the donkey are hostages and stakes in feuds opposing celestials to terrestrials.

*Cognitive forms:*

- Causal explanation: The donkey's lot is explained as the result of a consecution of events. The explanation makes sense with reference to a moral ground of evaluation according to which one should keep one's word. To renege one's own promise is a crime that calls for punishment.
- Will to power: A contest for power is going on between two parties. A given balance is broken, only to be restored.
- Control on earth: The stake of the power contest and its object is the hegemonic control of life on earth.

*Logic mode:*

- Antagonism
- Equilibrium
- Hierarchy
- Ternary play

*Theme:* Challenge to the god's ascendancy on earth.

*Process:* Gods' supremacy on earth is to prevail over attempts of subversion and games of power.

By *cognitive forms* are understood internal structures of signification. A broad canvas of sorts, they point to the semantic texture of the fabric. Their function is to circumscribe fields of cognition, project modes of apprehension and organization of the lexemes and mythemes available to the narrator. Each of these forms shows a particular performative capacity.

By *hermeneutics* are understood a set of interpretative perspectives. These are categories similar to the weft, those threads woven across a warp to give the fabric a composite structure. They help to semantically make sense of the discursive concatenation of events. Several interpretative perspectives are possible and may overlap without exclusivity, depending upon the level, the angle or the context of reading. The first immediate level is that of the motivation that prompts the narrator to recount the myth, often in response to a query of the collector. In general the referential context in which the myth is remembered give us the *narrator's* point of view. This is the interpretation immediately offered to the collector and analyst. It may appear partial, limited or ad hoc to an analyst who is no party to the myth. It may look like a close sight, prompted by immediate needs. The need is naturally being felt for a sight from a distance, from a wider perspective or another vantage position. The second set of two *analytic categories* comprise attempts to define two such broader or deeper perspectives. They are generally complementary hermeneutical viewpoints that specify the interpretative framework of the narrator. They may differ from the narrator's viewpoint.

*Process* refers to the dynamic profile of the discourse as a whole. This points to the overall achievement, the global discursive aim of the narrative, that is to say, what it actually performs as an act of cognition.

Once the vision displayed by the narrative is realized, one may further try to fulfil the destiny of the text through reactivating its objective meaning, here and now, in our present time and space. This amounts to bringing the internal dynamics of the narrative to bear upon the context of the present reader or recipient. This exercise looks for semantically homologous historical referents in different contexts. We call this a *re-contextualization*, and it amounts to understanding ourselves through a confrontation of our condition with the vision and intentionality of the text.

The *re-contextualization* gives a new lease of life to a text otherwise doomed to die out of complete want of reference. This is sought to be achieved in practices of cultural action undertaken among the same subordinated communities to whom the narrative belongs, or among other similar groups of people who are likely to find some correspondence in their present context with the discursive strategy of the ancient oral text.

## 'The Kindred of the Donkey': A Symbolic Identification

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Three narratives from the Vaḍār community illustrate and substantiate the foregoing methodological statements. The three stories reach us as text only, but the present life condition of the donkey, the focus of our analysis, is well known, as well as its particular connection with twelve communities of very low social status in Maharashtra. The Vaḍār are one of a cluster of twelve castes that, in their own terms, call themselves the 'kindred of the donkey', *gāḍav gota* (*gota* refers to a caste, relations or kindred considered collectively). These castes are: *Beldār*, *Ghisāḍī*, *Ghongaḍīvāḷe* Vaḍār, *Kaikāḍī*, *Kāñjārbhaṭ*, *Kaṭhevāḍī*, *Kolhaṭī*, *Kumbhār*, *Parīṭ*, *Telaṅgī*, Vaḍār and *Vaidu*. Their association is that all of them maintain donkeys as their main means of transport, work and livelihood. They form, therefore, a collective of castes, *jātī samūha*, conscious of sharing on this account a similar rapport with the donkey. As a result, a bond of fraternity, *bhāvbaṇḍki*, binds them up into a phratry of sorts, *bhāukī*, a group of kinsmen, *bhāvbaṇḍ*. The 'kindred of the donkey' have for their work companion an attitude of friendly consideration comparable to that of the peasants for their bullocks; they worship their donkey on the day peasant communities worship their bullock. The first narrative<sup>7</sup> begins with the jump of Hanumān, son of Vāyu, to swallow Sūrya, the sun, and ends up with an account of the relentless plight of the donkey, the Vaḍār's faithful carrier whose toiling life is explained as a curse. The Vaḍār were proud and happy at the end of the narration to show to the collector the *piṇḍa* of the god Śaṅkar under the hoof of their dear animal; this evidence authenticated the truth of their narrative as well as their own privileged association

with Śaṅkar. The second narrative was equally reported<sup>8</sup> as the ‘story of the lot of the donkey’, the flat nostrils of which are similarly explained as a punishment. The circumstances of the collection of the third narrative should be kept in mind.<sup>9</sup> An old man had stated that the donkey is an incarnation—*avatār*—of Hanumān; he was, however, unable to remember the story that would establish the validity of his statement. The narrator was then present. It is on hearing this that he was reminded of the narrative that he recounted to show how the donkey is indeed really a form, *rupa*, of god.

Two symbolic identifications and three representations familiar to the Vaḍārs communities provide the narratives with idioms well known to the ‘kindred of the donkey’ and our interpretation with a safe ground. The identifications are the donkey, the Vaḍārs’ faithful carrier, and Hanumān, a divine emblem of the Vaḍār communities. Regarding the donkey, another myth<sup>10</sup> stages the close work associate as an alter-ego and image of the unflinching and most loyal Vaḍār dedication to serve the king. The story implicitly conveys the message that at the image of their docile and hard-working donkey, Vaḍārs conceive of themselves as the most devoted servants of their king and the saviours of his kingdom, an important and significantly recurring theme in our corpus of narratives from Vaḍār communities.<sup>11</sup> Regarding Hanumān, the offspring of Vāyu or the ‘eleventh manifestation of Śaṅkar,’<sup>12</sup> a number of narratives portray him as a hero, and Vaḍārs take pride in recognizing him as their distinctive identity emblem on earth.

Three representations, therefore, blend in the background of the narratives that we are to present as symbolic self-images, supports of identification and claims of recognition for the Vaḍārs: the first is the donkey and Hanumān; the second, merged into a third one and specific to the third narrative, is the figure of a god, a keystone of the community.

These introductory remarks about the social and cultural context are meant to suggest that we are entitled to read the stories as an articulation reflecting the insight that the Vaḍār community shares about itself by holding a discourse about the donkey, a close associate construed as the emblem of the community. The narratives make sense on several accounts to the Vaḍār community, the addressee of the discourse, as a discursive exercise of self-recognition, through the lot meted out to the donkey, their alter-ego. I can now turn towards a systematic deciphering of the narratives.

## The Donkey is Cursed by Vayu (Vdr-02)

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Hanumān, son of Vāyu, the wind, at the moment of his birth, jumped to swallow Sūrya, the sun. All gods were frightened, and Indra somehow managed to strike him down on to the earth with his club.

All gods started blaming Vāyu, who got angry. He lost his temper and resolved to remain hidden, irrespective of whether all people died. He decided to hide in a tree.

Below the tree, a donkey was grazing. Vāyu made up his mind to inform only that donkey of his intention of hiding there, and said to the donkey: 'I am going to sit and hide in this tree. I shall keep you alone alive. But, look, whosoever comes searching for me, do not tell him anything.' The donkey agreed and Vāyu stayed in the tree.

Meanwhile, on earth all life was perishing and animals were suffocating. The gods were frightened, and Śaṅkar set out in search of Vāyu. In the course of his search, Śaṅkar's glance came to rest on the donkey, who comfortably grazing under a tree as he was getting a breeze. Śaṅkar had a suspicion that that donkey was likely to know about Vāyu's whereabouts. He came close to the donkey and requested him to disclose where Vāyu was. But the donkey paid no heed.

Śaṅkar bowed at the feet of the donkey and said: 'My *piṇḍa* will remain forever in your hoof. Tell me where Vāyu is.' Hearing these words, seeing Śaṅkar holding his feet and making a request, the donkey burst with pride. He was so elated that he broke the promise made to Vāyu and revealed to Śaṅkar that Vāyu was hiding in the tree.

On behalf of all the gods Śaṅkar asked Vāyu for pardon and requested him to save life on earth. Vāyu was appeased, but his rage against the donkey did not abate.

As the donkey had not kept his word, Vāyu cursed him: 'There shall always be a burden on your back. You will die toiling along forever.'

### Structural Analysis

### Thematic Analysis

#### *Unequal Balance of Power*

Initially, the general set-up is one of direct confrontation between two protagonists, or rather two parties, which may be identified as the terrestrials and the 'celestials' on the basis of their spatial determinations.

The latter are no mere incidental attributes. They substantially define the respective sphere of life and influence of each of the partners, that is, the world they belong to. The jump of Hanumān up to the sun god presupposes and measures the qualitative discrimination that opposes one party to the other as the top/higher/superior to the bottom/lower/inferior along a vertical line. In this regard, the fight forthwith opposes unequals and starts at the initiative of the inferior or lower party.

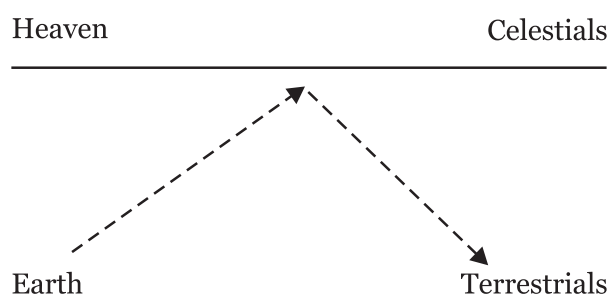
The reason and motivation of the conflict are not stated. Henceforth, the nature of the contest has to be deductively inferred. In this regard, one essential attribute of the initial aggressive move, its primeval dimension, should be pointed out. The conflict seems to have no other reason but itself. As soon as Vāyu has a son—accomplishment of his will or extension of himself—what he generates is an act of aggression. The conflict might be construed as the expression of the father's will to power. The jump of son Hanumān, at the very moment of his procreation, may be considered as responding to an innermost will to power of his genitor. The latter's immediate retaliatory move as soon as the son falls on earth—where he should belong—is revenge born out of frustration.

The gods, the 'celestials', do not give any reason either to immediately strike down the assailant. They simply do not bear any infringement on their territory. The most significant opposition here is an absolutely discriminative distinction between earth and heaven as spheres of existence and influence, fields of domination or natural horizons of control. This elementary distinction is taken for granted and never stated. The gods' exclusive dominance in heaven finds its expression in a pure denial to a 'terrestrial' to enter their territory. Maintenance of distance and spatial discrimination is for the celestials the first way of asserting their power.

Moreover, separation is to be maintained not as mere horizontal seclusion, but as a vertical discrimination. The gods' supremacy is built up upon a schema of absolute vertical spatial segregation. This dynamics is represented in Figure 4.1.

The import of this claim to power by spatial segregation is significantly corroborated by the impotence of gods on earth. Since Vāyu can immediately put an end to any breath of life on earth, the gods are terribly frightened for the simple reason that they cannot, on their own and on the spot, reverse this situation. They ought to come down and diplomatically negotiate with their opponents. On earth, gods prove to

**Figure 4.1**  
**The Dynamics of Spatial Segregation**



*Source:* Created by the author.

be impotent and subaltern. They depend on the will of the terrestrial agencies, which have to be placated and convinced in the first place. They have to send their representatives for reaching a compromise. This representative finds himself in such a position of weakness that he has to bow down at the feet of a donkey and make an unconditional apology to Vāyu in the name of all the gods. The gods cannot on their own volition impose their will or implement their wishes.

We may figuratively see this static balance of power where each of the protagonists holds the other party in check, although differently, through vertical discrimination on the part of the gods and through direct control on life on the part of terrestrial agencies (Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.2**  
**The Static Balance of Power**

|           | (A) Celestials | (B) Terrestrials |
|-----------|----------------|------------------|
| In heaven | +              | –                |
| On earth  | –              | +                |

*Source:* Created by the author.

### *The Means of Control*

Vāyu, the wind, is projected as the element of life on earth. Life is synonymous with breath. The opposite of life, death, starts as living beings suffocating for want of the breath of life. Symbolically, life is under the control of Vāyu: as soon as wind stops blowing, life discontinues and all

living creatures languish and perish on earth. This gives him a powerful stake and bargaining power to keep the gods in check.

In this regard, two contrasting facts are taken for granted, though not stated by the narrative. First, the gods should worry about the continuation life on earth as a matter of concern: the welfare of living beings appears to be entrusted to their care and monitoring capacity. Second, in addition to this, their impotence at preventing any harm being done to this life and their inability to forthwith and on their own counter the fatal move of Vāyu is all the more amazing. Both facts act as basic evidences in the eyes of the narrator and his audience. Let us only take note of them for the time being without entering into the semantics of these assumptions.

Against this backdrop, the issue facing the gods consists in finding the ways and means to control the move of terrestrials against life on earth. Two different means are conspicuously devised by a shrewd Śaṅkar. Both of them find their rationale in the Achilles' heels of the terrestrials whom he has to outwit. The weakness of the one is the strength of the other and vice versa.

With Vāyu, the way around is an apology in the name of all the gods in order to placate Vāyu's rage. Vāyu is pleased with the gods coming down to him and falling on their knees through their representative. The latter's official apology—as counterfeit as it might be—and humble request to oblige is an acknowledgment of sorts of dependence and powerlessness. This is enough to cure Vāyu's wounded ego: this seemingly avenges his previous defeat (the fall on earth of his son). Then a compromise is possible: Hanumān is not welcome into heaven, but Vāyu finds gratification and pride in obliging the gods and blowing life again. And the gods are satisfied that life is maintained so that every living being may henceforth as a rule remain obliged to their kind agency and give them credit for breathing in peace.

With the donkey, Śaṅkar is helpless as long as the donkey is faithful to his promise and takes the side of Vāyu, as agreed upon. His loyalty towards Vāyu is essential to the victory of the terrestrials; Śaṅkar's request remains futile and unheeded. Thus, even a donkey can keep gods in check. The gods' representative appeals to the donkey's self-conceit and inflated ego, and manipulates him easily. The gullible terrestrial shifts his loyalty.

The fact that the weakness of the one is the strength of the other is reflected, diachronically, in the whole narrative developing through

sets of inversion that follow on from each other as a discursive chain. We may figure this linking up first in a static way with two inverse sets of synchronic figures (Figure 4.3), and then dynamically with two sets of diachronic lines showing a final status of the agency similar to the one prevailing at the start (Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.3**  
**Two Inverse Sets of Synchronic Figures**

|           | (A) Celestial agencies | (B) Terrestrial agencies |
|-----------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| In heaven | + → -                  | - → +                    |
| On earth  | - → +                  | + → -                    |

Source: Created by the author.

**Figure 4.4**  
**Two Sets of Diachronic Lines**

|                          |           |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| (A) Celestial agencies   | + → - → + |
| (B) Terrestrial agencies | - → + → - |

Source: Created by the author.

Thus, according to the tables, the celestials manage to retain or conquer their initial position of power even on earth, while the terrestrials are finally brought back to their initial position of powerlessness vis-à-vis the celestials.

Thus, on the part of celestial agencies:

1. In heaven:
  - + Gods' segregation: absolute power in their own territory.
  - Celestials are powerless on earth: depend upon the good will of terrestrials.
2. On earth:
  - Gods make solemn apologies, bow down at the feet of a donkey, humbly request and pray.
  - + Gods' manipulative skill fools the donkey, appeases the wind, brings under control an adverse situation.

And on the part of terrestrial agencies:

1. In heaven:
  - Debarred from heaven; access absolutely prohibited.
  - + Can stay and move only on earth, their sole domain.
2. On earth:
  - + Keep celestials in check; bring down gods to their feet.
  - Eventually deluded by gods, who circumvent them.

Finally, whatever may be the changes occurring in the initial balance of power, the processes that take place result in the original state of unequal relation of power being not only preserved but reinforced.

### *Patterns of Power*

Three patterns may be pointed out. First, the fact of an unequal balance of power prevailing between the spheres of earth and heaven is taken for granted as a hierarchical constitutive set-up that needs neither explanation nor justification, and stands beyond challenge. The celestials reign unchallenged in heaven, and successfully control any challenge coming from the terrestrials. This unsaid fact stands by itself as an evident truth. The overall semantics of the narrative makes sense within that symbolic pattern only. Conflicts may alter that balance only temporarily. Any imbalance affecting the pattern will find a mode of resolution leading to the re-establishment of the state of original unequal balance.

Second, this mode of resolution appears as an in-built dialectic inherently constitutive of the very attempts to reverse the pattern. Such reversals prove self-deceptive. Self-assertion inverts itself into self-delusion. Vāyu's retaliatory self-assertion mellows into the compensatory mental gratification granted by the gods' unconditional apology.

Third, the narrative in fact stages three agencies. The play is ternary. Besides the two main protagonists, the third decisive agency is the donkey. This personage belongs to earth, but as an agent to no party. Co-opted by the first party to side with him, he has no particular interest to do so. He operates as a sort of mercenary who is rewarded for his services. No wonder he shifts his loyalty as soon as he secures a better reward and a greater mental satisfaction through obliging another master. He then forgets his first master with no uncertainties. The weakest character in the drama and least significant, without his knowing he happens to play a decisive part but as a wild card.

Only instrumental to facilitating the play of the main protagonists, he is, without his knowledge, too bound to find himself at times blessed, at times victimized by his masters.

## Conclusion: Whither?

Can the text still address itself to contemporary contexts? Re-contextualization may find its markers in the recapitulative cognitive mapping shown in Box 4.1.

### *Re-contextualization*

A puzzling internal semantic contradiction opposes two emblematic figures of identification, Hanumān and the donkey, and splits the narrative in two semantically opposite directions. There is, at the start, an identification with the hero Hanumān who dares to challenge the gods as soon as he is brought to life. The jump to swallow the sun testifies to an aggressive will of annihilation of the whole crowd of heavenly deities. This is a characteristic feature of our corpus of Vaḍār narratives. The same challenge is explicitly displayed in another story (Vdr-18) where a hungry Hanumān, seeing in the sky a red roundish thing (the sun), mistakes it for a fruit and jumps on it. Indra, king of the millions of gods, once informed, sends an army to wage war against the aggressor. Hanumān exterminates the soldiers with his tail. Indra strikes with the thunderbolt. Vāyu obstructs Indra's thunderbolt, stops blowing and hides himself in the body of Hanumān, who does not let him go. All life on earth vanishes. Hanumān does not yield till Śaṅkar, of whom Hanumān is the eleventh manifestation, intervenes and brings him to reason. Vāyu is set free. The story was narrated<sup>13</sup> to show how the shrewd and powerful Hanumān makes fun of Indra, the king of gods. The Vaḍār identify themselves with the Hanumān aggressive deed and own it. The jump of Vdr-18 repeats the jump of Vdr-02 as an attempt to challenge the god's ascendancy. The same symbolic conduct of aggressive assertion also recurs in Vdr-26 as the idiom of a struggle of subordinate caste to uphold a claim to a symbolic status of solar lineage. In short, the identification with Hanumān in Vdr-02 projects the heroic utopia of a subaltern community symbolically challenging its masters and their supremacy. However, today Vaḍārs are altogether

deaf to that discourse, and their narrative is unable to reactivate that memory of assertion and revolt.

On the contrary, Vaḍārs identify themselves with the donkey, whose subordinate condition and toiling life is an inalienable curse. This is the only sense that they can make out of it. They are even proud of showing the seal of the divine blessing that Śaṅkar left for them under the hoof of their donkey as a reward for the latter's surrender. In fact, the donkey's submissiveness is semantically redundant as it duplicates the whole import of a discourse, which seals the inalienable victory of those whom their hero wished to annihilate. Vaḍārs and their old narrative nowadays are at cross purposes. Their narrative is actually meant to seal their subordination together with the defeat of their hero and the surrender of their donkey. They are tragically unconscious of it and unable to recover a past memory of rebellion that their narrative itself, though a discourse of defeat, could not completely erase.

Nevertheless, although this contradiction measures the amplitude of the tremendous amnesia that affects the memory of the Vaḍār community, the smothered memory of rebellion can be retrieved and repressed drives reactivated. Our present cultural context makes us aware of the contradiction. It enables us to unearth the buried memory. A new lease of life opens up in a new context to the extent that Vaḍārs wish to live up to their own initial inspiration.

The two following narratives show no such contradiction. They unambiguously display, each of them, one of the two opposite alternatives: repression and mute subservience in Vdr-17 and utopian imaginary reversal in Vdr-24.

## The Donkey is Punished by Indra (Vdr-17)

Indra had picked a quarrel with Sūrya. In order to pull Sūrya down, Indra told Megharāj the king of clouds, to sit still and keep hiding. Thus, Megharāj hid in a well.

A drought spread all over the earth and lasted fourteen years. All life vanished, and the gods set out in search of Megharāj.

A green grass, *haraḷ*, had grown all around the well in which Megharāj was hiding. A donkey used to come there to graze. He was the only being alive as he alone was getting grass to graze upon.

The god Sūrya happened to walk along. The sight of the donkey alive and of the green *hara!* all around the well made him suspicious. He entreated with the donkey: ‘Tell me where Megharāj is.’ Eventually, he fell at the feet of the donkey and held them. The donkey knew absolutely nothing so he had nothing to tell. Sūrya was about to leave when he peeped into the well, and came face to face with Megharāj.

Torrential rains started pouring everywhere.

When Indra came to know the whole event, the donkey was brought muzzled in front of him. As a punishment, Indra enlarged flat both the nostrils of the donkey.

## Structural Analysis

**Table 4.2**  
**Synoptic Table: Semantic 1 Structural (Vdr-17)**

| <i>Indra</i>                                                  | <i>Megharāj and earth, the space of conflict and stake</i>                                                                                                  | <i>Sungod Sūrya</i>                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1st sequence: Aggression</b>                               |                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Indra is quarrelling with Sūrya; he wants to pull Sūrya down. | Megharāj, the cloud king, is directed by Indra to hide at the bottom of a well.<br>As a result, for fourteen years a drought is rampant; all life vanishes. | Disarray among the gods. They search for Megharāj, but don't find him.                                                                                                  |
| <b>2nd sequence: Vain search for the cloud king</b>           |                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                                               | A donkey is grazing green grass around the well, the only one being to survive as he alone gets green grass. The donkey knows absolutely nothing.           | Sūrya happens to walk by; the sight of the green grass and of the grazing donkey makes him suspicious. He pleads with the donkey, falling at his feet and holding them. |
| <b>3rd sequence: The cloud king is discovered by accident</b> |                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                                               | Megharāj finds himself face to face with Sūrya. Torrential rains start pouring down immediately everywhere.                                                 | Sūrya is to leave the place: he peeps into the well by chance, and spots Megharāj.                                                                                      |

(Table 4.2 Continued)

(Table 4.2 Continued)

| <i>Indra</i>                                                 | <i>Megharāj and earth, the<br/>space of conflict and stake</i>          | <i>Sungod Sūrya</i> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>4th sequence: Revenge</b>                                 |                                                                         |                     |
| Indra orders the donkey<br>to be brought to him,<br>muzzled. | Indra orders both the<br>nostrils of the donkey to<br>be enlarged flat. |                     |

*Source:* Created by the author.

## Thematic Analysis

### *Scenario for a Conflict*

The pattern of the narrative is structurally similar to the scenario of the conflict projected in Vdr-02 and to some extent in Vdr-18. Our reading here will concentrate on its essential elements. A comparison of the three myths proves helpful to construct and articulate a sort of logical pattern that I like to label as a conflict scenario, irrespective of its various ‘actants’ and their shifting roles.

1. The conflicts start as a quarrel between two individual parties:
  - Hanumān/Vāyu against Sūrya/all gods (Vdr-02);
  - Indra against Sūrya/all gods (Vdr-17); and
  - Hanumān/Śaṅkar against Sūrya/Indra/all gods (Vdr-18).

The quarrel from the start appears to be not an occasional feud but a standing opposition.

2. In the three myths, Sūrya the sun god is the target of the aggression. The first party takes the initiative through:
  - swallowing Sūrya;
  - pulling Sūrya down to earth; and
  - plucking Sūrya as a fruit to be eaten.

The aggression aims at taking hold of Sūrya and humiliating him. The initial provocative step is the symptom of a deep hostility which then unfolds itself. The myth could end with this petty blow of no consequence. Such is not the case. The initial blow only inaugurates the frontal attack.

3. The universal dimension of the conflict appears in the fact that all the gods in heaven feel furious and frightened by an attack that directly targets only one of them. The jump to swallow or bring down the sun is perceived by the party under attack as a provocation meant to engineer a generalized conflict. The conflict is not restricted to a private quarrel between two individual parties and their petty blows and kicks.
4. A similar universal dimension is clear in the nature of the blow, which provokes the gods' tremendous anxiety and disarray:
  - all breath of life disappears, all beings suffocate and perish;
  - all rains stop and drought is rampant for fourteen years; and
  - all life is extinct on earth.
5. The providers of life on earth keep hiding, inactive,
  - the wind at the top of a tree;
  - the cloud at the bottom of a well; and
  - Vāyu in the body of Hanumān.

They are, naturally, the crucial personages of the drama. They claim a control over the stakes of the conflict. Whether they act on their own or at the request of another party, they stand as the determinant 'actants' of the myth.

6. The reversal of situation happens quasi-unexpectedly when:
  - the donkey and Vāyu are outwitted by Śaṅkar;
  - the cloud surrenders without a word to Sūrya; and
  - Hanumān complies with the request of Śaṅkar.
7. The gods manage to obtain the return to normalcy on earth when, thanks to their initiative or decisive injunction:
  - Vāyu obliges and blows again;
  - Megharāj immediately pours rains; and
  - Vāyu is released by Hanumān.

The disorderly agents and temporary retainers of life on earth are brought to book and led to perform again as providers of life—as their duty requires—by a direct intervention of the gods. The decisive and final ascendancy of the gods is obvious in each myth.

8. The brunt of the conflict is eventually borne by the donkey, an outsider, an agent who is no party to the conflict, who by mere

chance finds himself involved in it just because of his presence at the spot. This purely instrumental involvement is remarkably rewarding in a first phase, but in the end turns out to be a reason of vindictive punishment by the defeated party: curse of life-long hard work for not keeping a promise of secrecy, or nostrils enlarged for having been only indirectly and unknowingly instrumental to the discovery of Megharāj.

It should be stressed that the instrumental status of the alien third party proves crucial to turning the whole situation upside down, whether this results from a wilful intervention of the outsider or is independent of his will. In other words, if this pivotal role of reversal is crucial to the semantics of the narrative itself, this does not follow from the character nor the will of the personage—the donkey—who is no party to the conflict, but from other logical compulsions that pertain to the semantics itself of the narrative and that the donkey serves as a mere instrument.

### *The Stakes or the Semantics of the Conflict*

The control over life on earth is obviously the first crucial stake. This is explicitly articulated by the myths. Still, what is not stated in this respect but simply taken for granted is why such control over the smooth continuation of life on earth and the concern for the welfare of all living beings should be of such paramount importance to the gods. For the myth this goes without saying; it is an obvious assumption that requires no statement or explanation. The terrific anxiety felt by all the gods and especially by their king or chief is assumed as naturally understandable. This implication belongs to the realm of unsaid truths, which sets up the whole cognitive setting of the myth. This cognitive framework is shared by all those to whom the myth makes sense. It points indeed to the essential sense of the myth, and partakes of the truth that the discourse tells its audience.

The unsaid truth is that of the natural supremacy of gods over all living beings and the earth as a whole. Gods are the regular guardians of life. The earth and its welfare are their domain and prerogative. Therefore, it is no wonder that the wind and cloud become crucial stakes in the conflict as soon as one party wants to challenge the gods' supremacy and authority, either out of aggression to simply counter them and make an attempt on their power, or only for taking revenge

and settle personal scores. To oppose the gods amounts to holding in check their ascendancy on earth by encroaching on this prerogative. No wonder, therefore, that the confrontation assumes the dimensions of a generalized conflict in heaven where all gods are bound to unite against the usurper who challenges their authority altogether, and then on earth where the challenge of extinction of life is to be effectively faced through restoring the original order.

To attack the gods' supremacy on earth amounts to breaking a given disposition of power that establishes an order of a subordinate relation between divine and human beings. The revolt intends to break that order, inaugurating a situation of frightening crisis. The gods are bound to react. It has often been noted that a myth usually starts with a situation of disorder or disequilibrium, the imbalance being in fact an anomaly brought in an established order of rapport. The myth then goes on displaying a process of restoration of the right order of relation. Vdr-17 regularly ends up with the decisive reassertion of the gods' ascendancy on earth, that is to say the re-establishment of the regular world order by gods themselves, their guardian. A simple face to face with Megharāj proves immediately effective.

## Conclusion: Whither?

### *Re-contextualization*

Three issues may be raised in our present context. The first one is of a philosophical nature, the second one anthropological and the third one sociological.

When the narrator is mainly concerned with the donkey within a given context of power relations, our focus shifts towards the whole discourse as a single phrase. This phrase implicitly takes for granted and overtly intends to demonstrate that the existing hierarchic dispensation of power relations prevailing between all possible beings on earth and heaven is absolute. Neither gods nor terrestrial agents can alter it. The discourse means to enforce and legitimize that order in a context where there is an ideological consensus about its validity and an unflinching acceptance of its rightness. The cloud pours rain as soon as it faces the sun; the donkey does not even think of challenging an undeserved punishment. The order reigns supreme for each actant and instantaneously rules over their stray action, once needed.

**Box 4.2: Cognitive Mapping (Vdr-17)**

*Title:* Indra brings drought and death to abase Sūrya who discovers Megharāj hiding in a well

*Semanteme:*

- Actant: Megharāj/cloud, Sūrya/sun, Indra, donkey, all the gods.
- Space: earth, well.
- Action: graze, hide, punish, wander, search, entreat, rain.
- Function: drought, life extinction, suspicion, flat nostrils, green grass.

*Mytheme:*

- Conflict, war among contending gods.
- Gods' crowd, impotency and scare.
- The weak, pivot of power games.
- The weak, scapegoat and victim.

*Hermeneutics:*

- Narrator's insight: Story accounting for the punishment of the donkey.
- Analytic category 1: Quarrels for ascendancy between heavenly gods and those ruling on earth.
- Analytic category 2: Rainclouds, life on earth and the donkey are taken as hostages in the gods' feuds.

*Cognitive forms:*

- Causal explanation: The donkey's lot is explained within a series of events.
- Will to power: A contest for power is going on between two parties. A given balance is broken only to be restored.

*Logic mode:*

- Antagonism
- Equilibrium
- Hierarchy
- Ternary play

*Theme:* Confrontation for hegemony on earth.

*Process:* Supremacy on earth is a stake between Indra, king of gods, and Sūrya, master on earth

*Source:* Created by the author.

Our present context questions the very assumption of the discourse. We own the text to disown its discourse as politically not correct. We receive it to counter its hegemonic purport. This counter-cultural stand immediately assumes a universal dimension as it prompts us further to raise the basic issue of the philosophical motivation that

gives grounds to the assumption of the narrative, and conversely leads us to challenge its validity and assume a counter ground.

The second issue is the fact of the ternary structuring of power conflicts. This point was stressed in the thematic interpretation of the previous narrative. The present text brings again our attention to this anthropologically significant fact. Shifts in power relation happen through the play of a third agent who is no party to the conflict opposing the two main contenders, but easily accepts any instrumental role on the order or request of one or the other party. This suggests a tripartite model for the analysis of power processes, with specifically distinct attributes to be recognized to each party.

The third issue is sociological. The semantic structure of the narrative incorporates and reflects social, economic and political processes specific to the historical contexts in which the narrative appeared as act of speech addressed to audiences. While these processes cannot be documented in the past, the discursive structure points to our present history: Which socio-cultural configurations nowadays similarly hide behind the acceptance of an hegemonic and hierarchic overall dispensation? Which community feuds hide behind conflicts of deities? Which socio-political games hide behind ternary conflicts?

## The Donkey is a Hidden Form of God (Vdr-24)

There was a *kumbhār*, a potter, who had a donkey. The donkey kept on insisting that it wanted the king's daughter as his wife. The *kumbhār* thought that if the king ever came to know about the obstinacy of the donkey, he would surely kill him, the potter. As a consequence, he decided to leave the town.

But as there was only one *kumbhār* in the town I, it was ordered by royal decree that he may not leave. He was called to the palace, and the king asked him his reasons for wanting to leave town.

The *kumbhār* then told the whole story, to which the king responded: 'If your donkey builds a city of brass and copper in one night, then I will give my daughter to him.'

The *kumbhār* told the donkey what the king had said, and the donkey erected a city of brass and copper in one night. The king gave his daughter in marriage to the donkey and built a palace for them in the forest.

Every day, in the middle of the night, a horse would descend from heaven. The donkey would then become a prince, ride the horse and go around the whole world. One night, the queen woke up and saw this happening.

She asked the donkey to tell her the whole story. That was when one came to know that the donkey was a form, *rupa*, of a god.

## Structural Analysis

### *Appearance versus Reality: Logic of Revelation*

The crucial binary opposition is between empirical appearance and true reality. A logic of revelation serves the purpose of the narrative of progressively unveiling the true identity of the donkey whose nature remains hidden, unsaid and, therefore, unrecognized. The global structural pattern of the narrative seems best visually represented through a design of vertical ascension from bottom to top. The whole dynamics is one of assertion and vindication of supreme ascendancy through a progressive unfolding of the donkey's strength and power. The result is a radical inversion of status from subordination to supremacy with a claim to recognition of supreme divine royal authority. The narrative itself provides the key with a final statement explicitly telling the addressee or the audience what is to be understood and eventually believed against all appearances. The discourse is addressed to those who share the same belief with regard to the donkey, in particular the community of the *Vaḍārs* who recognize the donkey as the specific emblem of their caste.

### *Binary Oppositions: Subordination versus Ascendancy*

Binary oppositions of subordination and ascendancy are constantly repeated in various sets of opposition. They follow each other through reversals of situations that mark the distinction of levels as the narrative unfolds step by step its semantic import. They constitute the pervading logical modality of the discourse. The narrative articulates them in three parts that may look like the three acts of a drama of progressive revelation. I attempt to project the logical structure of each part in table form as this helps underscore the semantically significant oppositions on which I shall comment (Tables 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5).

**Table 4.3**  
**Act I: Repressive Order and Apparent Stability**

| <i>1st sequence</i>      | <i>Subjection</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <i>Actual dependency</i>                                                  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1st sequence:</b>     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                           |
| Donkey's claim rejected. | Donkey, mute, submissive carrier; claim denied as nonsensical.                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Potter unable to depart with his donkey and survive.                      |
|                          | Man, absolute master of animal, is the only one to decide.                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Potter decides to leave with his donkey to save his life.                 |
| <b>2nd sequence</b>      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                           |
| Potter's plan curbed.    | Potter, subordinated artisan; attempt to quit simply repressed without appeal; king's absolute control over citizens.                                                                                                                                                                  | King cannot part with his potter; orders potter to stay to save the city. |
| Resulting state:         | Total subordination and denial of autonomy for the donkey and potter.                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                           |
| <b>Conclusion:</b>       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                           |
|                          | 1. Humans reign supreme over animals and the king over citizens, thanks to internalization of established order.<br>2. Internal contradiction points to alternative order and possible instability, but it is actually covered up and not activated, it remains in a state of inertia. |                                                                           |

Source: Created by the author.

**Table 4.4**  
**Act II: Ascendancy Denied Recognition**

| <i>3rd sequence</i>    | <i>Challenge taken up</i>                                                                                                                                                                      | <i>Performance covered up</i>                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Demonstration of power | King orders potter to tell the truth: king challenged to give princess. King defies the donkey with a regal supra-human power performance. The deed of the donkey: display of divine strength. | The demonstration of regal strength is achieved during the night. Exile of donkey and princess into a palace in the middle of the jungle where there is no human being. |
| Resulting state        | King and population respond with a no-recognition strategy to the display and claim of royal power and status.                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                         |

Source: Created by the author.

**Table 4.5**  
**Act III: Supremacy Revealed and Acknowledged**

| <i>4th sequence</i>       | <i>Enthronement from heaven</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <i>Secret acknowledgement</i>                                                    |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Revelation of true nature | A horse descends from heaven; donkey transformed into a prince; royal ride on horseback around the whole world.                                                                                                                                                | The event happens in the middle of the night; the queen wakes up only by chance. |
| Final state               | The acknowledgement is a response forced by an external intervention; it is not announced nor seemingly shared by the population nor the king; only the addressees of the discourse are seemingly meant to share, understand and own the meaning of the event. |                                                                                  |

*Source:* Created by the author.

### *Donkey versus Earth as a Carrier*

The donkey as a simple beast of burden carries soil and stone from the earth—stone and soil that stand as the foundation for the whole world. The donkey as the potter's and Vaḍārs' carrier may be projected as the one among all living beings who is the most closely related to the foundation of the world on the one hand, and, on the other, to the shaping by the potter of earthen forms and construction by the Vaḍār of stone buildings. The donkey is implicitly associated with the basic realities of which the world is made, first, as their pure carrier; second, as a servant associated with those who secure for the world some basic necessities as builders and potters.

### *Donkey versus Potter and Potter versus King as Servant*

At the level of visible daily performance of servile physical work, the donkey is subjected to humans. He is perceived and treated by his masters as deprived of authority, capacity or will to act independently. The level of appearance or empirical realities visible under the light of the sun displays the donkey's obvious subservience. This subservient condition is reflected and duplicated in the master's own subordination to the king: the potter is scared of the king and completely submits to his will. He is easily forced to stay and open up his mind to the king.

The inverse of this total subordination of the donkey to the potter and of the potter to the king is, on the part of the potter and the donkey, the total dependency of the potter upon the donkey's physical labour as a carrier of the soil that he needs, and of the king upon the potter's work as there is no other potter in town. This ambivalent semantic redundancy of subordination and dependency projects the donkey—the central personage and 'actant' of the narrative—as the symbolic duplicate of his master. Both masters are obliged to the subaltern. Yet at the level of the daylight visibility none of the masters sees or recognizes his obligation. The daylight can be said in this regard to be so strong as to act as a blinding clarity.

### *Donkey versus King as Builder*

As a builder of a royal city, the donkey displays miraculous strength. His genius transcends all expectations. The king cannot but be taken aback in front of a competence that manifests itself as simply divine. The donkey gives a city to the king, a city that the king is supposedly the only one capable of offering to his citizens. The earthen pot of the potter, the donkey's master, gives way to metal walls and houses defying the ages. The one who carries soil and stones for potters, builders, Vādārs and kings to build up earth wares, temples, houses, palaces and towns proves to be more powerful than all of them: he erects in no time a city that may last forever. The donkey as city builder is implicitly putting a claim to royal prerogatives and capacities.

But this happens only during the night. The daylight ignores the deed. The king only acknowledges the remarkable feat, but does not recognize it. He sends the new king and queen to live in the jungle, alone, outside of the world of human beings, in the world of beasts that the donkey belongs to. The palace in the jungle for the king-donkey to live absolutely aloof from the society of human beings corresponds to the deed being performed only during the night. The revelation of the donkey's miraculous strength shines only in the dark. Apparently, no one in the kingdom knows about it. The new king-donkey is invested with no royal power or status over the city's population.

There is no denial of the fact either. The king is likely to own the deed as it is clear that only a king can perform such feats, and there should be no denying this. The king-donkey is ousted from the city of humans and sent to live in a no-man's land lest his demonstration of

superior power be recognized in the daytime of the society of humans. The manifestation ought to be denied social recognition.

### *Donkey versus Princess as Ruler*

At the level of those human relations that grant status in the city of humans, the donkey as a stubborn animal—non-human form—is opposed to a princess—superior state of humanity. Since the start, the donkey's demand to marry the princess is a claim to the status of a ruler, *Kṣatriya*. This claim of equality with a princess is forthwith denied: the potter itself in the name of the whole society of humans rules out the idea. When the king acknowledges the fact of an actual right of the donkey to a status at par with the princess, a palace is built for both of them. But the palace—image of a superior state of humanity—is located out of the city of humans, in the jungle—image of a savage state of life. The new king and queen are not allowed to live in the brass and copper palace erected in the middle of the city. The signs of power and status ought to be kept out of the eyes of men lest their meaning be recognized.

### *Revelation, a Light Wrapped up in a World of Darkness*

The carrier of earth who used to tread heavily on earth during the day as a beast of burden sits on the back of a horse descended from heaven and is carried all around the earth as its ruler. This happens for that short while in the middle of the night, and deep in the forest palace, when one day is over and the next one is yet to come. The servile animal-slave is then being vested with the status of a *Kṣatriya* enthroned by heaven to rule over the whole world. During this final and instant stage, a rift or a suspension between two days of this world, reveals the true identity of the donkey. Power and authority are shown as his divine constitutive attributes. Still, this glory shines in the darkest of time and the most savage place on earth every night, and in front of no audience nor populace to acclaim the supreme ruler.

Under the sun in the daylight and among civilized humans in the city, the donkey's essence is and should remain invisible; only the princess happens to know about it—and the Vaḍārs. But the queen is not seen proclaiming the secret that a luminous night revealed to her, and no one in the city would ever believe the discursive claim of the Vaḍārs, were they ready to announce their belief and nightly vision.

The revelation takes place progressively, partially and occasionally, as it were, only to be denied recognition in a progressively stronger manner. The shift of the scenes from daylight to night is analogous of the unfolding revelatory process according to which what appears as a servile non-human being who is granted no respect proves to be a god-like power figure. The night darkness is illuminated, but no-one is there to see the truth that is revealed.

The same progress in revelation is concomitantly homologous of a constantly harder and harder denial of recognition of the claim made by the revelatory process: the daylight is triumphantly blinding the sight of humans to the nightly illumination. The denial intensifies in proportion to the process of revelation.

The logical texture of the narrative is tight and flawless. Sets of opposition relentlessly succeed one another till the servile donkey is eventually granted what was denied to him at the start: the glory and power due to a *Kṣatriya*. But the light that dawned upon the queen when the world was plunged into a deep sleep will remain blacked out forever by the daylight.

The fact remains a discursive claim, addressed to and owned by those only who share the same belief in the donkey as an *avatār*, particularly the community of the *Vaḍārs*. The narrative makes sense for those who already recognize the donkey as the specific emblem of their caste and the figure that the community identifies itself with.

## Thematic Analysis

A will to define and assert one's own collective identity and a claim for being recognized as a corresponding dignified status are the motive drives that prompt the story of the donkey of the potter as narrated by a *Gāḍī Vaḍār*. The intentionality of the text is reflected in three cognitive operations that propound three answers, which are logically homologous. They progressively reinforce one another till the narrative reaches its peak.

### *The Vaḍārs, the Donkey and the Princess*

A first process of symbolic recognition operates in most concrete terms with the donkey as image of a toiling and subaltern life condition. The referent of the discourse here is the most immediate level of experience

of the Gāḍī Vaḍār, stone-workers for whom the donkey is a familiar and faithful daily carrier of stones. It is quite natural for those workers to entertain feelings of sympathy towards a close assistant dedicated all his life to carrying stones for them and earth for *kumbhārs*. Connivance and familiarity, a sort of affinity, unite them. This was already implicit in Vdr-02 and Vdr-17, and is supported by the observation of the relationship that Vaḍārs and *kumbhārs* actually entertain with their donkeys. They may legitimately feel close to their work companion and consider it as a kind of alter-ego. On the basis of that close association of disregarded and servile beings, Vaḍārs compose the present narrative as a discourse meant to put a claim on and express a request of dignified status equal to that of their master; they accordingly direct the personage of the donkey to enact for them an appropriate role.

With this purpose, the drama forthwith opens with a claim decisively made by the donkey to marry the princess. That claim is at the outset definitely denied by the society. A Vaḍār is a Śūdra, a manual labourer, a servant. An individual of subordinate condition has no right whatsoever to pretend to the kingly status of a ruler. Such a pretence on the part of the servant of a king who has only one daughter amounts to a bid to be king. Such an offence cannot but be severely repressed. The potter is well-advised to run away and save his life. He has not the slightest notion of conspiring against the king and usurping a power that he is meant only to serve.

Another story (Vdr-10) stages a somewhat comparable situation, but with a significant difference. In Vdr-10 the princess herself, with the consensus of the king and the king's council, resolves to marry 'whoever is the best in the whole world'. A Vaḍār proves that he is actually that 'best one' as no-one except himself among all gods and humans can move mountains and make palaces and houses out of rock for the welfare of all. The princess happily marries the Vaḍār,<sup>14</sup> but he does not lay claim to the throne; he is only satisfied with the official recognition of his excellence and the grant of land with good stones to perform his duty of stone-worker. There is no expectation of breaking away from his subordinate state. The king can, therefore, oblige with no reluctance. In our present narrative (Vdr-24) it also takes no time for the donkey to win the princess. But the deed this time is much more dazzling and with no parallel. The performance is a direct challenge of the king's

ability to accomplish a feat that is within royal competence and duty: one naturally expects from a king a particular ability to build marvellous cities. The king implicitly assumes and states the same when he quite appropriately challenges the donkey who covets his position to display a king's ability. This is precisely what the donkey shows.

A Gāḍī Vaḍār is no less a builder than a king. But the discursive strategy of Vdr-24 displays a totally different intentionality. It lays a claim, on the strength of a building competence, to surpass the king. The narrative stages the servant against the master, and projects the superiority and excellence of the servant over his master. The challenge is overt and the master defeated. The real competence and consequent right to authority and power are with the servile worker. Privately, the king cannot but take notice of this and keep to his word. The donkey is given the princess and enters a palace.

But the master is shrewd enough not to make it public. No-one in the kingdom should ever recognize the definitive superiority of a subordinate. The powerful servant is exiled in a savage region where there is no human being to hear about and recognize his ascendancy. A king assigned to solitary residence in a palace built in the jungle is no more a king: without recognition by human subordinates, there is neither king nor power. Without exercise of power, there is neither rule nor kingdom.

Eventually, the master of our story has won a double victory over his slave. He has added to his credit and glory a brass and copper city built up by his slave—a performance that actually eludes his own capacity and is blatant evidence of his weakness. He has rid himself of the worthy and right pretender to the throne. The control over the slave is complete: by appropriation of the performance and by denial of the status—competence to rule—due to that capacity.

### *The Vaḍārs and the Kingdom*

Gāḍī Vaḍārs see themselves as builders of cities and kingdoms. Let us focus again on this self-perception and another claim to recognition. The donkey's tremendous deeds demonstrates his professional excellence and grants him an inalienable supremacy. In the donkey's performance the Gāḍī Vaḍārs stage and project their extraordinary occupational self-confidence, and a persuasion of their strength and unparalleled skill.<sup>15</sup> In the present story they significantly make a point

to portray themselves as masons of palaces and cities for kings. As a matter of fact, they often enjoy conceiving of themselves as dedicated servants of kings and saviours of kingdoms in critical circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

As a matter of fact, the discourse lays a claim to more than a social status—to a hidden identity. The display of strength in the instant construction of a entire city made of brass and copper, a princely marriage secured as due right, and the living in a palace regularly built by the king, though, logically contrast an undeniable hidden essence of power with contrary worldly appearances of subservience: the power to erect cities operates in the night and is kept unnoticed, the royal palace is built in the heart of a jungle.

These logical oppositions are not mere mental play of opposites, nor complacent contemplation of the hidden capacities of the donkey. The narrative is no fancy tale. The donkey's tremendous skill to build a lasting city, his marrying a princess and his residence in a palace mean to lay and legitimate the claim of the Vaḍār community to a status of *Kṣatriya*. The servile animal is in essence a prince. A community with a low status makes a symbolic attempt to upgrade itself to the highest possible on the strength of its performance as builder, a king's distinctive prerogative.

### *Prince Riding a Heavenly Horse*

The third process of community recognition takes as its base the figure of the donkey projected as a divine entity. I have already stressed in the other levels the pervading logic of binary opposition and inversion: here also it is in the middle of the night that a horse descends from heaven and stages a reversal of the apparent reality; the princely power of the donkey as a true *Kṣatriya* and supra-human denied recognition by king and citizens in the day is fully deployed and manifested when darkness wraps the whole earth. The beast of burden is transfigured as to incorporate its proper form of god by an intervention from heaven that reverses its worldly subalternity. Then the 'true story' can be realized and confessed by the queen: 'The donkey is an incarnation, an *avatār* of god.'

Let us not miss the intention of the final statement of the discourse as the queen likely does: she seemingly understood nothing more than what the theological utterance itself states about the divine nature of the donkey. But the queen is only an 'actant' of the narrative. The 'actor' of

the discourse, the narrator and his community are not concerned with theology. Their narrative is not a theogony. The decisive intention and rationale behind the final radical semantic reversal is the installation by the Gāḍī Vaḍār of the donkey-god as the distinctive deity of their community and their collective emblem of recognition. The donkey in this regard can be paralleled—being considered, in the words of the narrator, as Hanumān's *avatār*—with a god or a guru that *Vaḍār* equally consider and own as their deity.

The identification of the Vaḍārs with their familiar animal carrier through granting a status of *avatār* to their symbolic self-image proves a deeper and more significant process of community self-assertion than their simple association with Hanumān. Here Vaḍārs take the initiative to create a god in their image and of their own.<sup>17</sup> Hanumān was not at their image nor likely totally nominated at their initiative: they picked it up from symbolic idiomatic images (particularly the flying Hanumān carrying the mountain in his hands) currently circulated; they semantically invested the given figure as they could. Through their donkey as form of god, to whom they belong, they constitute themselves as a community of Gāḍī Vaḍārs and secure a place in society at large truly *as* stone-workers. On this account they were hitherto assigned in society a status of servility and a degraded, animal-like nature as human being. Through this self-authorized installation as their god of their intimate work companion whom they identify with in their everyday life, they claim for themselves *as* stone-breakers another place in the prevailing system of social communication: a superior status of excellence. With their donkey-god they symbolically invest a society, conquering in it a place truly for themselves as Gāḍī Vaḍār, stone-breakers.

In short, the intention of the discourse is to invert a condition of subordination. This is accomplished through creation of an appropriate emblem of self-recognition—one's alter-ego—which truly incorporates one's everyday condition of servility in order to symbolically transfigure it through a process of revelation of a hidden, powerful and divine nature.

## Conclusion: Whither?

### *Re-contextualization*

One may like to underscore the intractable hegemony of the symbolic system that at any stage represses the voice and will of the subaltern:

**Box 4.3**  
**Cognitive Mapping (Vdr-24)**

*Title:* A donkey erects a brass city, marries a princess and every night rides on horseback round the world.

*Semanteme:*

- Actant: potter, princess, king, queen, donkey, horse
- Space: earth, heaven, palace, city, forest
- Time: night, midnight
- Action: marriage, building city and palace, riding round the world, royal decree
- Function: fear, made of brass and copper, obstinacy

*Mytheme:*

- Ride on horseback.
- A Śudra marries a princess.

*Hermeneutics:*

- Narrator's insight: The donkey is a form, *rūpa*, of god, being an *avatār* of Hanumān.
- Analytic category 1: Śudra vindicates highest status through deifying the donkey.
- Analytic category 2: Caste god is a ground for status, social identity and assertion.

*Cognitive forms:*

- Identification through symbolic self-image: an emblematic figure is projected to be owned as symbolic reference of one's own identity.
- Recognition through community god and worship, media of symbolic insertion and social communication.
- Recognition through self-assertive moves of autonomy and resistance.
- Claim to ascendancy.

*Logic mode:*

- Insertion
- Inversion
- Excellence
- Revelation

*Theme:* Low caste self-upgrading to highest status.

*Process:* Inversion of subordinated condition through claim and revelation of a hidden divine nature.

*Source:* Created by the author.

the donkey's wish is repressed by his master, the potter; the potter represses himself out of his master's fear; the donkey's achievement is made to remain unnoticed; the revelation of his nature is blacked out. The donkey's repression is not due to the strength of a symbolic system that he would have internalized and owned; it is the result of a positive will on the part of the one, the king, whose power controls the whole system of social and symbolic relations. The hegemony is political.

One may, on the contrary, like to see how a flight of imagination prompts a process of absolute inversion of the system of power relationship. The order is turned upside down by a discursive fiction of mind. It is homologous to well-known popular practices, which in carnivals (Bakhtine 1970, 1984: 122–24) and other similar festive rituals—such as those organized by ‘play-acting societies’ at the end of the medieval ages and during Renaissance, and in which the donkey had his role to play (Davis 1979: 139–250)—enact the same inversion of status and roles, the subordinate taking up roles of king and clergy, master and husband, lord and superordinate.

However, the inversion remains highly ambiguous, and the narrative open-ended. Four contrasting interpretations seem possible:

1. The inversion might be construed as a mockery of the king and his power. The donkey's mimicry debases those in power. The status of the king is deflated. Once appropriated by a donkey, the king's power becomes redundant and illegitimate, and the king loses all ascendancy. For a while a ludicrous fiction, the textual discourse writes off the entire given dispensation that is grounded in the king.
2. One may, on the contrary, understand that the donkey, zealously and jealously, attempts to emulate the king. I stressed the care taken by the Vaḍārs to situate themselves in close proximity to the king as his most dedicated servants, and in critical circumstances to act as the saviours of the kingdom. We may understand that this proximity projects itself in a dream of assimilation to the king's power. Then, while the oppressed donkey succeeds in imagination to equal and even excel the king, the latter's feedback is a repressive control of the rival. The donkey should remain the sacrificial scapegoat at the base of the social order. Mimesis and violence are the two basic drives of any society (Girard 1985: 61–67).

3. Quite differently, in the perspective of a wish of collective recognition through a divine emblematic figure projected as symbolic reference, the result might be a reification of the Vaḍār status through its very deification. This could be compared to Mahatma Gandhi granting the name of 'Harijan' to communities otherwise looked down upon to raise their social dignity, with the simultaneous effect of sanctioning their actual lot. The divine identification, by a perverse effect, through granting a transcendent value to a subaltern condition, maintains its very subordination.<sup>17</sup>
4. We may also make an opposite reading of the claim to a divine identity *of one's own*. The radical inversion of role and status may be construed as a claim of absolute superiority for the toiling donkey over the hegemonic political and symbolic powers of this world. When the latter reduce him into servile subjection and assign to him a degraded status, the narrative discourse proclaims that the slave is actually the one who deserves the power and the glory. The nightly transfiguration, an ontological revelation, becomes a utopia (Paquot 1996), an act of faith in oneself which might prove the seed of a new history.

## Notes

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1. 'The semiotic points to the mode of significance specific to the SIGN and constitutes it as a unit ..., with regard to its capacity to signify, it is a unit of signification and remains such.... Strictly speaking, any semiotic study will consist in identifying those units, in describing their distinctive features and in discovering more and more refined criteria of their distinctivity.... Taken in itself, the sign is pure identity to itself, pure alterity to any other one, ground of any meaning for the language, material necessary for making sentences' (Benveniste 1974: 51–52).
2. 'With the semantic, we enter into the specific mode of significance which is generated by the DISCOURSE. The problems raised here refer to those raised by language as a production of messages. The fact is that these messages cannot be reduced to a succession of units to be separately identified; we have not a sum of signs producing a meaning, it is absolutely the other way round, it is the meaning (the "intended") which, globally conceived, realises itself and splits itself into particular "signs", namely, the WORDS. Moreover, the semantic necessarily takes hold of the whole lot of referents, whereas

the semiotic, as a principle, stays retrenched and independant from any reference. The semantic level is identical to the world of enunciation and the universe of discourse' (Benveniste 1974: 64).

3. Linguistics considers only systems of units devoid of proper meaning, each of them defined only in terms of its difference from all the others. These units, whether they be purely distinctive like those of phonological articulation or significant like those of lexical articulation, are oppositive units. The interplay of oppositions and their combinations within an inventory of discrete units is what defines the notion of structure in linguistics (Thompson 1981: 153).
4. Like every linguistic entity, myth is made up of constitutive units. These units imply the presence of those which normally enter into the structure of language, namely, the phonemes, morphemes and semantemes. The constituent units of myth are in the same relation to semantemes as the latter to morphemes, and as the latter in turn are to phonemes. Each form differs from that which precedes it by a higher degree of complexity. For this reason, we shall call the elements that properly pertain to myth (and which are the most complex of all) large constitutive units (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 210–11; Thompson 1981: 154).
5. 'The constitution of the *self* is contemporaneous with the constitution of the *meaning*.' On the one hand, self-understanding passes through the detour of understanding the cultural signs in which the self documents and forms itself. On the other hand, understanding the text is not an end in itself; it mediates the relation to himself of a subject who, in the short circuit of immediate reflection, does not find the meaning of his own life. Thus, it must be said, with equal force, that reflection is nothing without the mediation of signs and works, and that explanation is nothing if it is not incorporated as an intermediary stage in the process of self-understanding (Thompson 1981: 158–59).
6. 'Appropriation loses its arbitrariness insofar as it is the recovery of that which is at work, in labour, within the text. What the interpreter says is a re-saying which reactivates what is said by the text.... I shall say that appropriation is the process by which the revelation of new modes of being ... gives the subject new capacities for knowing himself. If the reference of a text is the projection of a world, then it is not in the first instance the reader who projects himself. The reader is rather broadened in his capacity to project himself by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself' (Thompson 1981: 164, 192).
7. The narrative, classified Vdr-02 in our *Corpus of Marāṭhī Kathā*, was collected by Jayraj Rajput at Khed Shivapur (*taluk* Haveli, district Pune, Maharashtra) in October 1992 from elders of the local community of Mati Vaḍārs.
8. The narrative, classified Vdr-17, was collected by Datta Shinde in June 1996 from Shivalinga Vadekar, at Sonari (*taluk* Paranda, district Usmanabad,

Maharashtra). The obvious structural similarity with the previous story is all the more striking when we take notice of the distance in time and space, and the unrelatedness of the narrators.

9. It was in January 1996, in the course of discussions between the collector Datta Shinde and elder Vaḍārs at Loni (*taluk* Shrirampur, district Ahmednagar, Maharashtra). The narrator is Namdev Baburav Ghungare, a Gāḍī Vaḍār, aged 50. The narrative is classified as Vdr-24.
10. Vdr-07: prompted by hatred and jealousy, two sisters have taken away the newborn twins of the king, their brother, and buried them in a garbage heap, outside the palace. While scratching the garbage with his hooves, a donkey finds the children. His master brings them home and takes care of them as if they were his own children. The identity of the children is discovered and revealed when the Vaḍār happens to work with them at the construction of the king's palace. He then hands over to the king the sole heirs of the kingdom.
11. In Vdr-01 the Vaḍār community projects itself in a heroic eponym: Madanya, the most dedicated servant of a king who eventually erects a *samādhī* to the memory of his famous worker killed in duty. In Vdr-23 Vaḍārs strike water for all in plenty from a rock when the king himself with his whole kingdom is doomed to perish during a most severe drought.
12. In Vdr-18 the jump of child Hanumān to swallow the sun repeats the jump of Vdr-02. The same symbolic conduct of aggressive challenge of the god's ascendancy repeats in Vdr-26.
13. Collected in June 1996 by Datta Shinde, from Gondappa Dyappa Chavan, 60, at Tambewadi, Solapur, Maharashtra.
14. Analogically, in Vdr-16 the princess lives with a clay figure that is similarly an intimate symbolic alter-ego for the Māti Vaḍār (I have a similar identification, though in a different way, in Vdr-13). A significant element in these three stories (Vdr-10, 16 and 24) is that Māti and Gāḍī Vaḍār identify themselves through an intimate association as equals with a princess. The donkey and the princess are the two significant agents or 'actants' of those stories.
15. This is a recurrent representation: Vdr-01, 07 and 10.
16. When they display their expertise and extraordinary work capacity, it is often for the sake of a whole kingdom to be maintained strong or simply saved, for instance, in Vdr-13, 21 and 23. Gāḍī Vaḍārs in their myths associate their occupational skill as builders more with palaces and kingdoms than common houses for the person on the street. In Vdr-21 and 07 the association is with kings' lineages and kingdom to be restored.
17. This process occurs in several other myths, for instance, Vdr-05, 06 and 28, with the same intention of autonomous constitution of the community.
18. This happens to be the explicit function of Vdr-01, 14 and 22.

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# 5

## MEMORY AND SOCIAL PROTEST

BADRI NARAYAN

In this chapter I attempt to study an example of folk memory, the popular myth of Chuharmal of the Mokama and Bhojpur region of Bihar. The people's memory of Chuharmal carries among the Dusadh (a subordinate caste) a sense of victory over the Bhumihaar (an elite and dominant caste) of Bihar. It creates a sense of defeat among the elite and feudal classes. Chuharmal is known as the hero of the lower castes in central Bihar where his memory is kept alive by the common people as a medium of social protest. As a result, feudal classes are trying to erase it with the barrel of guns. A case study of Ekauni *Kand* will illustrate this phenomenon. Such memories are the cause of increase in social tension, class conflict, massacre and suppression. The popular myth of Chuharmal accounts for four caste riots that took place in the Aurangabad region of Bihar between 1970 and 1990.

The methodology of this chapter is based on participant observation and field studies in the Aurangabad, Mokama (Nalanda) and Bhojpur districts of Bihar at identified places. The process of eliciting and receiving responses has been attentiveness to oral replies, symbols and texts. Rituals were also given due attention, those practised by common people in their everyday life, as well as those performed by the political and religious discourses going on in that society.

### Social Memory, Cultural Dialectics and Power

In contemporary society, memory is being used as much as a means of dominance, as a lever of protest. Power and elite forces make effective

use of social memories with hegemonic purposes, but are equally frightened by them. So they erase those threatening social memories that forces of resistance want to save and preserve, or instead transplant false memories to suit political ends. This dialectics is a continuous and immanent part of societal dynamics. During this process, memories are captured and reutilized, reconstructed and interpreted to serve new historical needs, and their forms are visualized according to aesthetic needs. Classes with a hegemonic will are able to transform memories of those communities that fall within the boundary of their system of interaction. Nirmal Verma (1995) points out that while claiming to change the future, dominant forces attempt to change the people's past. To change the past actually means changing memories.

Still, many communities are able to keep alive their original memories as they do not fall under the spell of those hegemonic systems of communicative interaction. According to Milan Kundera (1990), the struggle of man against oppressive forces is the struggle of memory against forgetting. In India original memories are particularly preserved in rural areas remote from urban centres of cultural dominance, and they are passed on from generation to generation. Moreover, in any society memories of the same events that occurred at the same time take up different forms and originate different traditions. Various communities with differing mentalities and conceptual frameworks are equally active in this regard. For example, there is ample evidence of differences in the historical memory about the Kunwar Singh movement in 1857 among the rural people of Bhojpur and the rural people residing in a cosmopolitan city like Patna in the last ten years (Narayan 1995). Memories, good or cruel, created by the British colonial power among people do not vanish despite the disappearance of that power.

A queer but symptomatic narrative was heard during fieldwork in regions near Dehradun. In olden times an English officer used to live in a bungalow where he had employed an Indian cook. After independence the officer went back to Britain along with his family, but the cook continued to live in the same cultural memory of subordination till death. He did not discontinue his routine activities even after the English officer went away. For example, he continued to tie on his apron and put out the plates, knife, fork, etc., on the dining table. He also copied his erstwhile employee's daily activities. For instance, he used to sit on the chair and eat food with a knife and fork in a way similar

to the English officer. Thus, he relived that memory of subordination daily. In the process of that repetition, he now had to play both roles, that of the cook and that of the English officer. This typical example of a memory of subordination is confirmed by the old people of the countryside of Dehradun.

The exploitation or manipulation of memory is the root cause of many present-day national and ethnic conflicts in India. The traditional cohesive communities construct their present and future with these memories. Whoever be the caste heroes eulogized in folklore, the people positively relate themselves to the heroic deeds. As a consequence, contemporary Indian politics is taking shape by drawing upon people's social memories: a complex of memories will attempt to dominate others, while the same collective memories will be reconstructed as a patrimony of autonomous identity and as an asset of protest against these attempts of domination.

The conflict of memories between Hindu nationalists and Dalits is a case in point clearly illustrating how memory may be used as a means of dominance as well as a ground of protest. The tradition of Hindu nationalism based on memories of the past is being presented before the Hindu population tailored to political needs, with insistence on authenticity and greatness. By awakening these memories, its protagonists are playing a conspiracy game to attract the population in their favour. They have developed a language that is architectural of an illusion of sensitivity with great alacrity; they are using the modern media to articulate old memories in the context of contemporary political issues and power contest. They are reinforcing these memories not only through oral tradition and speech, but also by written text, by audio, by technology and, above all, by the visual images of video ads and photographs. This kind of exercise consists of turning memories into constitutive elements of dominance and hegemony.

But a parallel text of memories has been created by the Dalit classes to deconstruct it and further challenge the culture of hegemony and greatness. For this, they have been selective in discovering memories and images suited to their purpose. Against the interpretation of larger memories by Hindu nationalists in their favour, Dalit politics is constructing immediate memories to counter the former. It is giving a mythical content to Shambook and Eklavya, and continues to do so even with Ambedkar and Periyar.

However, the display of old memories is fraught with suicidal designs too. The same Dalit politicians, for instance, are oblivious of the fact that out of the totality of old memories, only those memories can be re-activated which are part of people's everyday life. Only those have a chance to be remembered and repeated. Periyar and others have failed to occupy such a position in the psyche of the man inhabiting in the northern belt of India. We may wonder whether they can ever be construed as mythical figures. One of the examples of this failure is the organization of the Periyar Fair in the state of Uttar Pradesh by the then government led by Mayawati, the Dalit chief minister, in 1995. In the mental space of the Dalits, the memories of Kabir, Ravidas and Shiv Narayan survive with the force of myth. Had Dalit philosophy been successful in developing or deriving a political language from these towering figures, they would have been liberated from their self-deceptive political discourse.

The memories of the depressed castes are, at certain places, offering successful resistance to the efforts of Hindu nationalism. I would like to give only one significant example. The movement of Hinduization started by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (literally, World Hindu Conference) in a tribal community of Orissa discovered that its greatest hurdles are the memories of the community, in which circulate certain folk stories similar to those which I will present here. For instance, once a question arose in the minds of people: 'From the five husbands of Draupadi, who was dearest to her?' Five seeds were planted and she was asked to name the one she loved most so that the seed could germinate. She evoked the names of all her five husbands, but that was of no use. When Draupadi remembered the sixth, the seed sprouted. The sixth was Karna.

Such primitive memories challenge the overall Hindu structure. In order to erase such memories, a movement is being launched by Hindu nationalists to articulate and disseminate, by any means, the main lessons of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. It is a conflict between the 'little' 'primitive' world of memories and the 'great' world of memories derived from the same primitive source. Similarly, changing the names of roads and universities is part of a movement for developing symbols for political use. A game of exploitation of symbols, myths and memories has begun.

## Massacre of Memory

Dateline: 19 June 1978. In a village named Ekauni, near Daudnagar, Aurangabad district (Bihar), a marriage party arrives at the house of Nonu Sahu. The dance *nautanki* (a dance drama) is being performed. In the village square, just as a love scene of the dramatic presentation 'Reshma and Chuharmal' (a folk drama very popular in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) starts, a bullet is fired from the audience and enters the chest of the actor playing the role of Chuharmal. A roaring sound echos, 'Stop this nonsense'. A stampede follows among the spectators.

This is a real event which occurred in the interiors of Aurangabad. As a result, two groups were formed in the village. One was led by the Bhumihar (landlord) and the other comprised the lower castes of Bania, Koiri, Chamar, Dusadh and others. The tension increased and conflict broke out between the Bhumihar *tola* (quarters) and the Purvi *tola* (the area populated by the lower castes) of the village. In fact, the bullet was fired by a Bhumihar youth because Reshma, the central female character of the play, belonged to his caste. The feudal Bhumihar upper caste perceived this memory as an insult to their caste. On the other hand, the lower caste reactivated the same memory as a record of protest against the feudal and elite classes of the region. Five murders have occurred during this prolonged conflict, besides many minor conflicts and agitations.

I came to know of this astonishing event from the files of Bhojpuri local daily *Tatka*. In an attempt to understand the internal social dynamics, I asked, how does a memory gets transformed into caste and class tensions, how and why some people want to preserve a memory while some other people try to avoid it? In fact, the murder of the actor was symbolic, but the attempt to murder a symbol was productive of intra- and inter-caste tensions. The police (Daudnagar station) consider the event simply as a murder resulting from caste tensions simmering for a long time. However, it is clear from the memories of local people and conversations with villagers that the cause of the caste tension in the village was the drama of Chuharmal. The feudal and elite class reacted saying that 'the drama was played to insult us'.

The event remains imprinted as Ekauni *Kand* in people's memory. Every event called '*kand*' contains flashing elements, the memory

of which is long-lasting and may become an exemplary reference. About 40 per cent of the total population in Ekauni village belong to the Bhumihaar caste; the remaining 60 per cent include the Bania, Koiri, Yadav, Chamar, Dusadh and some others. This is a high-caste dominated village and region, in which major landholdings are in the hands of the Bhumihaar. Lower castes possess very small plots of land. These castes are either businessmen or involved in traditional occupations. Chamar and Dusadh landless labourers work on a large scale on the land owned by landlords. However, the consciousness of the importance of education has reached the region today. Boys and even girls go to schools and colleges situated at a distance.

Most service-class people are from high castes and very few from the middle class. Though Ekauni is a village dominated by high castes, the majority of the population is from other castes. This is a region of Magahi culture, speaking the Magahi language. The term emerged from 'Magadhi', which denotes the Magadh region. To understand the folk consciousness of societies like the Magadhi, Angika, Bajjika, Bhojpuri and so on, in Bihar, we have to understand their differences in terms of the structural elements that discriminate memories and linguistic cultures from one another. Till the emergence of Buddhism, memories flowing through Vedic and Sanskrit language were prominent there. But after the emergence of heterogeneous sects like Buddha, Jain and Nath (this sect emerged in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar about the thirteenth century and Gorakhpur was the centre of it), and their popular attempts at the deconstruction of Vedic memories, memories of Buddhism, Jainism and Nath beliefs became influential in these folk areas through dialogues and debates with Vedic memories. Later on this resulted in the predominance of linguistic memories carried on in Pali, Prakrit (vernacular) and Apabhraṃś (dialect). Many folk heroes popular in these areas such as Bharathari, Sorathi and Brijbhar are described as associated with Nath sects.

Rahul Sankrityayan (1993) pointed out that Pali was previously called Maghadi, although there are major differences between contemporary Maghadi and Pali. Yet the degree of similarity was higher. Many words of Bhojpuri are from Pali, while those from Sanskrit are fewer. The present names of many of the villages are also derived from Pali.

Attempting to acquaint myself with the memory of people related to the 'event of the *nautanki*' and the protest that emerged from it,

I was amazed to discover that in the whole Bhojpur Rohtas, another region of Bihar, many similar events of caste tensions and land struggles had not only taken place, but had expressed themselves to a great extent in the form of social memories perpetuating a number of social conflicts. Another such event took place in Khutahan Bazar in the Tarari police station of Bhojpur. While the drama played during the festival of Dussehra, a derogatory song was sung by the *sutradhar* (leader of the chorus); this provoked the elite class of the region, leading to caste conflict and class tension in this *qasba*(town). Many people's theatre groups are active in this area. These, in a way are types of cultural expression of Naxalite politics that has emerged during the last decade. The banning of the performance of such plays by these groups and their arrests has not succeeded in stopping it, although the political party to which these groups are affiliated, once underground, now participates in parliamentary politics. In fact, these theatre groups have been imprinting upon the people's psychic memories which were meant to cause inconvenience for the established local power. Thus, power (both local and state) have tried to prevent it, and in retaliation the people have organized many processions and political actions to strengthen their resistance and raise people's consciousness against the ruling power. Thus, such dramas performed by such theatre groups as 'Reshma and Chuharmal' are flowing in people's memories in an autonomous form for centuries.

Many clashes have occurred, for instance, at Mahendra Bigaha (1996) and Phoolari (1988) in Aurangabad district of Bihar, prompted by this social memory. Usually people from lower castes are involved in the *natyamandali* (theatre group) and *nautanki* companies. As a result, consciously or unconsciously, they select dramas of such content and context that somehow assault feudal castes and their values. The paradoxical ambivalence is that they usually have to perform their programmes in the ceremonies of higher castes. They earn their livelihood through performing only for those who are opposed to the content of their plays. They entertain those very against whom their consciousness is nurturing feelings of resistance. At some places, when they play their dramas with no due consideration for the social structure of the villages, they face difficulties. They are able to conclude their overnight programmes properly wherever the population is not dominated by the high-caste, while at places where feudal castes are in dominance they have to counter physical threats.

Nageshar dance troupe is the most famous one in Bhojpur. Nageshar says: ‘Now we do not play the drama “Reshma and Chuharmal” [any more]. Feudal lords fire bullets during the performance.’ Still, the memory of ‘Reshma and Chuharmal’ has been gaining popularity through these dance troupes. The whole north-eastern part of Bihar is influenced by this social memory. It is perceived by different classes in different ways. The lower-caste and -class population glorify this social memory and assume it as a part of their tradition. According to them, this is a real event that occurred in their past. The other class consisting of feudal lords and ‘forward’ castes feel insulted by this social memory and want to get rid of it. They do not want to return to this area. They want to escape the spell of that memory.

## Orality, Festivity and Recurrence

The geographical background of this social memory is the Tal area (this is the name for vast stretch of uninhabited cultivated land) of Mokama and Badha Badhaiyya situated at the boundary of Patna, Begusarai and Nalanda districts of Bihar. As per the narration of the drama, Reshma and Chuharmal hailed from this area. This drama is banned, though no public declaration has been made to this effect in the area. It is the zone most intensely controlled by the Bhumihar, the landlord caste of Bihar. The reasons given for the undeclared ban are the following. First, the play degrades upper castes and especially the Bhumihar caste of feudal landlords. Second, according to Mahadev Prasad Singh, there is a *vardan* (Goddess’ blessing) that whenever a man sings the song of Reshma and Chuharmal, the women of the area will leave home and follow him. Mahadev Prasad Singh (a folk artist, who did extensive fieldwork to trace the genealogy of Chuharmal and Reshma) believes that descendants of Reshma–Chuharmal are still alive today. Reshma belonged to a rich family of Bhumihar Kshatriya of Mokama village and Chuharmal to a Dusadh family in a village named Anjani. Table 5.1 locates the empirical sources of the characters of the narrative.

A significant detail relating to the caste title of the folk characters is noteworthy. Those who were called Bhumihar Kshatriya now call themselves Bhumihar Brahman, and those who were called Dudhvanshi, now call themselves Dusadh. This was told to me by a

**Table 5.1**  
**Empirical Sources of the Characters**

| <i>Character</i> | <i>Area</i>    | <i>Ancestral caste</i> | <i>Ancestral link</i>                                                             |
|------------------|----------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reshma           | Mokama         | Bhumihar<br>Kshatriya  | a. Ajab Singh (brother)<br>b. Ranjit Singh (father)                               |
| Chuharmal        | Anjani village | Dudhvanshi             | a. Bihari (father)<br>b. Bansiram Surma (Dudhvanshi)<br>c. Chuharmal (Dudhvanshi) |

*Source:* Mahadev Prasad Singh. 1982. *Reshma–Chuharmal Ke Geet*, Biso Bhag. Calcutta: Loknath Pustakdaya.

middle-aged couple travelling with me while visiting Mokama for the study. To my question about the Chuharmal and the fair organized in his memory in the Tal area, the man replied, ‘This is the fair organized by the Dusadh where only lower-caste people go.’ I asked: ‘How can I go there after reaching Mokama station?’ To this he irritably replied: ‘Are you also Dusadh? It doesn’t seem so from your face.’ I replied: ‘No, Bhaisaheb! I am going there for research.’

The conversation revealed that the person was of Bhumihar caste and owner of many trucks. This conversation made me feel excited about how a social memory had become a symbol of identity of a caste or community and how the psyche of higher castes had received and retained it.

This social memory is the one of Reshma and Chuharmal. The folk tale of Reshma–Chuharmal is not a worn out folk tale for the common man. It is alive even today, its hero is very well alive in people’s memories. The sacred complex of Chuharmal has a fair held in his name in Mokama Tal area every year for two to three days in the month of Chaitya (March–April). People come here in lakhs to worship the Dusadh hero. Propitiatory rites, magic, invocations and incantations are designed to please Chuharmal. The place is located to the south of Mokama station at a distance of about 12 km. In a nearby village named Mor one finds a large statue of Chuharmal erected without the neck. During the season of crop-cutting, the first of the plants reaped are offered to the statue. This is a standard ritual in the worship of Chuharmal. People come here and pray for the fulfilment of their wishes. Lower castes have faith that the wishes expressed during the worship come true.

The hero of the story of Reshma and Chuharmal is also the caste hero of the Dusadhs and other lower castes of the area. It is worth mentioning that folk heroes like Loric (Yadav), Sahales (Dom, Dusadh) and Chuharmal (Dusadh) are also the heroes of the castes they belonged to. Without examining whether at any point of time in history they actually existed, we can understand the construction of their heroism through a study of the nature of their heroism. Through it we can also understand the consciousness of these lower castes and the outlook of the hegemonic castes towards them. Then, once we have understood the social meaning of this myth with its various details in reference to the local communities in the vicinity of Mokama, we can moreover understand the social composition of this area and get significant details relating to social processes and their impact in the present day. Thus, the symbolic construction of these folk heroes becomes a record of social history. By composing the myth of Reshma and Chuharmal, Dusadh castes have articulated their protest against feudal hegemony and its oppressive discrimination. Through creating parallel myths, rituals and religion, Dusadhs protest against the Great Tradition and glorify themselves. This is evident in a study by Risley (1981) on the Dusadhs of Nathpur. Similar incidents have occurred in Basti and Gorakhpur also when Dom kings had annoyed Brahmans by proposing marriages of their sons with their Brahman daughters in the colonial period.

## Multiple Texts

From a single text in the oral tradition many others can be framed. The narrative identity of any community, culture and nation is articulated in one unique fixed structure, though it is a story which may happen to be transformed into many stories. The tale of Reshma and Chuharmal has a single text, giving birth to many texts, every text containing a peculiar social meaning. It is difficult to say which text is the earlier one and which one is the latest, or which single text is transformed into many. The point is to elucidate the unique narrative identity of these multiple texts. All these texts are part of this single narrative identity. Using various media, the orthodox dominating ruling power organizes various festivals to celebrate the original event, so that no possibility

of other texts may be there; anyway, if such other text appears, it can be suppressed, erased or misinterpreted.

While dealing with the hermeneutics of popular tales Paul Ricoeur (1969) suggests that characters described in the tales have a narrative identity. This narrative identity has a most rigid structure, but it only causes the mobility of the tale. Through this, many elements get attributed to these characters jointly. While interpreting them, it is necessary to consider who is narrating the stories and to whom these are narrated. It might be that the same narrative identity is received in different ways by different people. In the folk tale of Reshma and Chuhamal, I have tried to search some of the elements constitutive of the narrative identity of the protagonists on the basis of the narrative identities projected in the many popular versions of the folk tale found in Mokama, the original place of the folk tale, and its neighbouring areas.

Post-modern thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and others consider that every text is pregnant with meanings that are delivered by the interpreter or rather the consumer of the text. In between texts and their interpretation, the veracity of the text only exists with the interpreter. Through the process of interpretation, the text originally meant to communicate something different, and it is this interpretation that will be decisive according to these thinkers. Further, the process of the interpretation of the text enlarges both the text and its meaning. Therefore, a text interpretation carries greater weight, for it is the interpretation that extends the scope of the texts.

The folklore of Reshma and Chuhamal, in praise of the latter glorified as a lower-caste hero, is constructed after the structure of the *naranushanshi* (praise of brave people and kings) tradition, which has been used as a pattern. The popular *veerakhyān* (tales of bravery) of Chuhamal are linked with *naranushanshi*. In the Indian *akhyān* (tale) tradition *naranushanshi* is an oral tradition that was compiled in Vedic *sahitya* or Vedic literature (*Rigved Samhita*) later on. A.K. Warder (1987) suggests that Indra *gatha* became popular on account of its praise of the Vedic warlord Indra. Some *gathas* (tales) are in praise of human heroes of which some tales were collected in text and some transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. Later on this resulted in the construction of a historical tradition.

*Text A*

What the dramatic folk story of Reshma and Chuharmal tells us is that Chuharmal was a handsome and healthy Dusadh youth. Reshma, the daughter of a local landlord, was fascinated with him and would offer him invitations for indulgence. Chuharmal initially tried to avoid her, but then she told him that she was the daughter of a high-caste landlord, while he belonged to the Dusadh caste. Thus, Reshma forced him to establish matrimonial relationship with her in which he succeeded. This relation resulted in a clash between Chuharmal and the landlord father of Reshma, leading to the victory of the virtuous hero, Chuharmal, over the landlord and his army.

This is the folk version of the memory of Chuharmal prevalent in the area. Although this version is more popular among some of the lower castes, its many other varied forms are no less popular among others in the area.

*Text B*

Rani Reshma and Chuharmal, it is said, belonged to the Brahman caste in their previous birth and formed a couple. They were reborn at different places near Mokama Ghat in Patna district. Chuharmal was born in a family of a saint living in Anjani village, and his wife in a Bhumihar Kshatriya *zamindar* (landowning) family. Later on his father sent Chuharmal away for schooling, where Ajab Singh, brother of Reshma, also studied. They became close friends. Coincidentally, once Ajab Singh fell ill, Chuharmal went to call for his father. Reshma saw Chuharmal and was so fascinated with him that she forgot her meals and started worshipping a goddess to obtain the favour of marrying Chuharmal.

Reshma sent a message for Chuharmal asking him to meet her at a lonely place. He was a religious, brave and handsome youth, and refused Reshma's offer. However, she was firm in her resolve to avenge this insult. Consequently, there was a clash between the armies of her *zamindar* father and Chuharmal's. The *zamindar*'s army was defeated. Again, with the help of a tantrik or magician with supernatural powers, Reshma tried to defeat Chuharmal. The remaining part of the narrative describes revengeful fightings of her father's army with Chuharmal, but the bravery of Chuharmal could not be defeated. This theme is displayed in local dramas and rural theatres.

*Text C*

Chuharmal was a cowherd. He used to uproot crops from the fields, but because he was strong, nobody could restrain him. But he was afraid of government employees. Once, the landlord's surrogates along with government employees surrounded Chuharmal and cut off his head. After the murder, his spirit started to destroy crops in the area. Thereupon people of the area fenced the place and started worshipping there.

This version of the myth sketches Chuharmal as an evil power killed essentially for the sake of public welfare. This text is usually a construct of the memory of the forward castes. The main content of the marital relation of Reshma and Chuharmal is removed and another theme is added in it. During fieldwork in the area an interesting explanation of the name of Chuharmal was heard. According to which the name originates from two words, *chor* and *chuhar*, meaning thief or robber in the folk dialect, and *chor-chuhar* (thief-robber) being a compound word popular in colloquial usage. The people of forward castes depict Chuharmal as a dacoit.

In the *Manusmriti*, the word *daku* means *saahasi* (adventurous); furthermore, it extends the meaning of *saahasi* as kidnapper or plunderer of wealth and in the law of Manu, the killing of *saahasi* was supposed to be the duty of the king. A.K. Warder (1987) suggests an interesting inference related to the act of stealing in history. According to him, Buddhist interpretation holds the view that in 'primitive' society, the concept of individual possession gave birth to 'stealing'. Thus 'individual possession' is synonymous to stealing.

According to the law of Manu, the king who forgives a person involved in *saahasi* activities is ruined shortly. The king also becomes an object of hatred by the people. Thus, the *Manusmriti* foresees the outlines of the Reshma–Chuharmal tale. As observed during the field survey, an old man Ram Singar Singh, 60, referred to the aforesaid justification and mentioned the event of the murder of Chuharmal in a local feud to be true. He asked me, 'Why did Ram kill Ravana?' On the other hand, the outline of the folk tale as popular among lower castes puts forward another justification from the *Manusmriti* that reflects an opposite image. The justification in the text is that if a higher-caste woman desires any lower caste man, the king should prevent it and may kill the woman, and if a Śūdra male desires any high-caste girl, then the death penalty is permissible.

The version popular among the lower castes mentions the proposal by a higher-caste girl to a lower-caste male, while the latter is projected as a righteous youth. Thus, punishing Chuharmal, despite his blameless morality, instead of punishing Reshma, leads us to many inferences. First, this act is regarded as an anti-religious act by lower-class mentality. Second, it shows that the saviour of religion had become the violator of religious principles. Third, through this narrative the lower castes want to project the degeneration within feudal culture.

#### *Text D*

Some people keep the memory of Chuharmal alive in yet another form. According to them, there was a time when thieves and cowherds used to destroy crops. Then an incarnation of the mighty Chuharmal came forth, who 'annihilated the destroyers of our crops'. Because of this food is offered first of all to Chuharmal in the month of Chaitya.

According to this version, Chuharmal is a symbol of goodness. He was the saviour of the people's crops. Hence, people of this area preserve his memory in a divine form. This connects them with Chuharmal and his tradition. This memory of Chuharmal is usually preserved among the middle castes.

### Memory of Protest and Protest by Memory

People of the area remember the narrative not as myth, but as a real incident. Heinrich Zimmer (1957) rightly says that myth is simultaneously real as well as unreal. A myth does not remain a myth because, instead of a god or demon who are the usual heroes of myths, 'a man' has become its hero. To transform itself into myth and link with primordial memory many a worldly symbol is identified with supernatural powers. Ranjit Guha (1995) shows to this effect that subalterns adopt as their gods some of those who are established as evil by the Great Tradition and become their worshippers. In this context, after a lucid explanation of the myth of Rahu, he mentions that Rahu—who is a demon in the 'Samudra Manthan' (Churning of the Ocean) narrative of the Mahabharata, and who is assumed as

being an *evil graha* (inauspicious planet) in astrology—is worshipped by Dom, Dusadh, Bhangi and Mang castes. This might have been the reason for Varahmihiri not to give any importance to this shadow planet in his works.

Similarities between the symbolism of Rahu and Chuharmal are obvious. Table 5.2 shows the homology of both.

**Table 5.2**  
**Symbolism of Rahu and Chuharmal**

| <i>Myth of Rahu</i>                                                | <i>Myth of Chuharmal</i>                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cutting off the head of Rahu by god Narayana                       | Cutting off the head of Chuharmal by landlord or <i>zamindar</i>                       |
| Role of Narayana who cuts off Rahu's head in the 'Samudra Manthan' | Role of the <i>zamindar</i> who cuts off Chuharmal's head in the forward-caste version |
| <i>Amrit</i> snatchers worshipped by Dusadhs                       | Snatchers of crops of farmers worshipped by Dusadhs and other similar lower castes     |

By giving a higher religious position to physically and spiritually strong mythological heroes whose deeds of bravery are absolutely anti-social in view of the morality of the Great Tradition, subaltern culture significantly raises a protest against the philosophical and ontological basis of the dominant culture. There are long traditions of transformation of symbols of criminals into myths of god. We can even name this as anti-tradition. Not only this, lower-caste people usually incorporate these symbols in their genealogy. Ranjit Guha (ibid.) construes these symbols as the symbols of their primordial history. There is a long series of such myths (Table 5.3).

In Baghelkhand, a cultural region of Madhya Pradesh, especially in villages around Satana, a Shanipujak (worshipper of god Shani) community is present. They are originally of the Teli caste and primarily worship Shani in their homes, but many villages also have temples dedicated to the god. Shani god is regarded as '*paapgrah*' (evil planet), ritually worshipped in Indian astrological systems. *Teldan* (offerings of oil made by Telis), for example, or attaching iron to boats, horses shoes, etc., are usually rituals related to the lower castes. The narrative identity of the planet Shani, although clearly fixed, still keeps on attaching with it narrative identities of many lower castes, and remains associated

**Table 5.3**  
**Myths in the Construction of Primordial Histories**

| <i>Myth</i> | <i>Worshipper</i>                                    | <i>Genealogical relation</i> |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Chuharmal   | Dusadh, Chamar, Dhobi                                | Dusadh                       |
| Sahales     | Dom, Dusadh, etc.                                    | Dusadh                       |
| Gaurayya    | Dusadh                                               | Dusadh                       |
| Gandak      | Maghaiyya, Dom                                       | Dom                          |
| Rahu        | Dusadh, Dom, Bhungi                                  | Dom                          |
| Duryodhan   | Schedule Tribes of Harkidoon Valley                  |                              |
| Shani       | Teli in Baghelkhand, Mallah in Gaya district (Bihar) |                              |
| Bhiyarane   | Kachi (Bundelkhand)                                  | Kachi                        |

with the latter. Thus, on the one hand, ‘evil power’ like the Shani planet, assumed to be of lower rank in classical tradition, is accepted and worshipped in the lower-caste communities; on the other hand, the religious identity of the lower and subordinate castes is constructed as a ‘narrative identity’. In addition, this should also be viewed as ‘dissent’ with regard to classical tradition. In classical astrological literature, till the time of Varahmihir, the belief was that only seven planets existed. Evil planets like Rahu and Ketu were not included in the astrological system. Varahmihir had included Shani in the seven planet system, but he did mention the god Shani as an evil planet.

The image of Chuharmal as a warrior and a lover is analogous to folk heroes of many other myths popular in Bhojpur and other cultural regions of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, as well as other states. Lorik of the Yadavs, Kunwar Vijaymal of the middle castes and the Vaishya caste hero, Shobh Nayak Banjara, all of them pertain to myths of a similar nature. Thus, the narrative identities of sub-altern castes interact with the myths of protest and resistance, as shown in Table 5.4.

Different castes may link themselves with these myths, still in a true sense these are folk heroes. The myth of Chuharmal differs from these myths in that even after being popular it is facing resistance by the hegemonic classes of society. In a real sense, this establishes the myth as a class myth. In fact, it is a representative symbol of counter-culture. At its root, it contains a consciousness of protest even today. One may construe it as a symbol of the protest consciousness that refuses to

**Table 5.4**  
**Interactions between Narrative Identities and Myths**

| <i>Folk heroes</i> | <i>Caste relation</i> | <i>Region of influence</i>                                                             |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lorik              | Yadav                 | Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, certain parts of Gujarat              |
| Kunwar<br>Vijaymal | Koiri, Yadav, Rajput  | Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan                                           |
| Shobh Nayak        | Vaishya, Vanjara      | Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, certain parts of Maharashtra |

be dormant. The constitution of this myth is very similar to the myth of Pururva. The qualities of bravery and the struggling for love displayed in Pururva's myth are also evident in the myth of Chuharmal.

Among all those myths popular among Dusadhs, there is one theme in common: all heroes are mentioned in the narrations as mighty, although they are killed by elite power. Thus, these myths stigmatize a process constantly at work in society, which is, the killing of the able and destruction of the talented potential of the downtrodden by the elite.

This tradition of narrative in our society eventually exposes the myth of the great eternal tradition of the defeat of evil. In other words, such myths as Chuharmal expose the falseness of the discourse of classical morality. These myths place on record the social history of those inequalities that continually affect these castes. They further reveal the sad end of individual chivalry in a power-dominated society.

## Folk Technique of Transmission of Memory

Let us focus on the technique by which this memory is communicated and disseminated. The analysis shows that to preserve their memory, strengthen its forms and make them influential, lower castes resort to oral traditions, ritualistic exhibitions linked to the worship of Chuharmal, repetitive performances, contextual communication and verbal and aural transmission, in a conducive atmosphere and with active involvement of those concerned. Consequently, thanks to the blending of various components of an oral form of communication such as *vak* (speech; aural communication), *drish* (sight; visual communication) and *krit* (action; communication through performance), the lower-caste

**Table 5.5**  
**Folk Techniques of Communication of Memory**

|                      |                                                        |          |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| <i>Vak</i> , speech  | Oral tradition and transmission                        | Audience |
| <i>Drish</i> , sight | Symbol, sign, temple, festival, statue, religious flag | Audience |
| <i>Krit</i> , action | Ritual, festival                                       | Audience |

version of the myth of Chuharmal gains ascendancy over other versions of the said myth. The upper castes adopt only the single technique of *vak* to communicate the myth, which proves to be less effective. Had this folk tale remained just in the form of a pure narrative or a pure text, then it certainly would not have become so effective as to motivate struggle and revenge.

This is a form of memory that is always alive and active. The reasons for this can be discovered in elements of the social and cultural environment:

1. Mokama Tal displays a social structuring that remains today what it was formerly;
2. the statue of Chuharmal, the hero of the drama, stands even today, and every year in the month of Chaitya, there is a fair on the location and
3. the forward and lower castes narrate these memories as part of a struggle for control and hegemony, even today.

Antonio Gramsci (Sachidanand 1996) believes that being ashamed is a revolutionary feeling, capable of transforming personality. Here, shame arouses violent reaction against a feudal society. However, in a 'low tempo' society like India the relation between feeling and 'personality' is not like that in Italy and other Western societies. In feudal societies 'being ashamed' does not easily cause one to be conscious of 'realization' of one's own 'social sin'. In urban and capitalist societies the social role of shame is different.

Second, the narration of a marital relation between a Dusadh and a Bhumihar is enough to make feudal lords fire guns. Moreover, the memory of Chuharmal and Reshma is not just a story; every year it is made alive again through dramatic re-enactment during the fair and this too arouses the memories of the people of the area. Myth and rituals maintain a close relationship. The performance of

rituals gives life to myth and the myth maintains the cycle of rituals. The ritual re-activation re-establishes memories in the consciousness of the people.

Chuharmal is a mythical figure and also the God of the Dusadhs. The caste is identified as worshippers of Chuharmal. The Dusadhs are otherwise characterized as 'guards', as they are employed by high-caste landlords for agricultural work of low standard but related to high-quality products. Kunwar Suresh Singh (1993) states that in Bihar Dusadhs' occupation is basically one of agricultural labourers. They have dispersed from the Magadh region to many other regions of Bihar. They have been involved in the work of carrying palanquins, many landlords have been employing them as *lathait* (security men armed with *lathis*, long bamboo stick) for their security. At some places they call themselves the descendants of Arjun, the famous hero of the Mahabharata and link themselves with Gahlot Chhatree (a sub-caste of Dusadhs). They usually live in villages. Anthropologists assume their language to be Indo-Aryan. Dusadhs use Bhojpur and Angika language area in the regions of Bihar which have fallen within their field of study. They use the Devanagari script. While searching for the historical reasons of the social and economic backwardness of the people of this caste, historian D.D. Kosambi (1972) proposes that the reason is that today, as in the past, they have refused to get involved in production and cultivation of crops. Ranjit Guha (1995) adds that though they have been serving traditional Hindu castes as slaves, consciousness of protest had also raised them against dominant powers and culture, a revolt which results in myths, stories and rituals of contest.

This memory has produced similar reactions not only in the Mokama region, but also in Patna, Bhojpur in Bihar and Ballia, Gazipur, and Azamgarh regions of Uttar Pradesh. In fact, exploitative social structures prompt legendary figures of a similar nature. Modern development and mass communication have brought some changes in mentalities; but although the cruelty of reaction might have lessened, the forms of retaliation remain the same. The experiences of the Ramendra Naujawandal dance party in Patna district are the same as that of Nagesar Nachdal in Bhojpur district. Naujawandal says that villages that are not inhabited by the Bhumihaar caste do present the play, but they do not play the drama where Bhumihaar people live.

## Conclusion

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The consciousness of lower castes creates symbols and myths of protest against the domination of hegemonic classes. Because the subaltern are not able to stand openly against the latter's control, their protest finds its expressions in the creation of mythical characters. This gives the satisfaction of a symbolic resistance. The oppressed then identify themselves with these mythical figures of their creation and convert themselves too into symbols of protest. If not able to strongly oppose anybody, then the mighty myths of resistance are worshipped in the subconsciousness. Similarly, such heroes are perceived as *devatva* (deity). Myths channel and regularize protests through repetition.

Before the 1995 Parliament elections, Laloo Yadav, chief minister of Bihar, went to the the Chuharmal fair and worshipped Chuharmal. By political appropriation of a myth firmly imbedded in the consciousness of the lower castes, he was trying to get the support of those castes linked with the myth. Power entertains two types of relationship with memory. On the one hand, it wants to utilize it up to a certain extent; on the other hand, it tries to abolish it, lest the memory become an asset against the establishment. Thus, social memories have to face basically three kinds of situations. First, political power wants to draw upon them for its political interests. Second, feudal powers want to abolish those social memories that repeatedly recur and rise against them. Third, people who express their protest through these memories want to regain and enrich them.

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# 6

## **SAY IT IN SINGING! PROSODIC PATTERNS AND RHETORICS IN THE PERFORMANCE OF GRINDMILL SONGS**

BERNARD BEL, GENEVIÈVE CAELEN-HAUMONT  
AND HEMA RAIRKAR

Experimental studies of reading and spontaneous speech analysis have brought into light the role of tonal patterns (an aspect of speech prosody) in conveying rhetoric aspects of verbal communication hitherto overlooked by classical linguistic analysis. Speakers tend to rely on tonal patterns—basically excursions of the fundamental pitch ‘F0’—to make their message ‘known’, ‘believed’ and to instil a subjective dimension into it.

It makes sense to hypothesize that similar strategies might be worked out by singers when the focus of their performance is a subjective re-interpretation of textual and symbolic contents of the lyrics. This hypothesis is checked here in the context of Maharashtrian grindmill songs. In the absence of a system of codification for tunes and lyrics, performers feel free to explore melodic (tonal/temporal) structures emphasizing the meaning of words, or conveying additional meanings that the core lyrics did not articulate. The latter is part of an individuation process that would otherwise be difficult to trace in group performance.

### **Singing at the Grindmill**

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The tradition of singing at the grindmill displays a remarkable continuity between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ thought processes and

modes of expression. Further, it aims at establishing bonds between individuals and groups. Our main concern is to capture the motivations of performers and their patterns of communication in this particular context.

Their ability to create, modify and perform these songs and transmit their impressive repertory throughout generations, are the components of an autonomous system of knowledge within communities of women. Peasant women in Maharashtra often refer to grindmill songs as 'their Veda' in contrast with the highbrow culture carried over by men with the support and legitimization of writing.

Documentary work indicates that to a large extent the tradition of grindmill songs crosses the conventional boundaries of family, village, cast and religion. Thus, it functions as a 'women's heritage', although not a static, 'feminist' set of essentialist world-views, rather a touchstone for understanding the psychological motivations and the social constraints of its performers.

The first principle underlying our methodology is that the keys for 'deciphering' the musical and textual content may reside in the performance itself—which includes extra-linguistic and extra-musical features such as gestures and the situation/status of the speaker or singer. It follows a recent methodological trend in French linguistics, namely, instructional semantics (*sémantique instructionnelle*) in contrast with the classical approach of componential semantics (*sémantique componentielle*) (Kleiber 1994). Ours may also be called a 'post-Heideggerian hermeneutics approach', whereby the 'art of understanding' belongs to the musical work itself as much as to its performers and appreciative audience (Vecchione 1997: 101).

The second principle is that a musical work (here, a particular performance) may be approached as a narrative, a 'fiction' whose reference is more sophisticated than the ones of scientific discourse or mundane speech communication:

This fiction takes its form thanks to a discourse that the individual musical work casts to audiences by producing itself as the figuration of a possible world and projecting itself as an 'act of speech' whose discursive type (figuration, narration, argumentation) is predetermined. As a speech, as a quasi-speech, the musical work is designed for audiences for some reasons; as a quasi-text, it configures itself,

for the requirements of that ‘act of speech’; as a discourse, finally, it aims at optimizing the effect of its destination by fixing its own modes of text arrangement.<sup>1</sup> (Vecchione 1997: 102)

The discursive dimension of a musical work rarely lends itself to a straightforward deciphering—not even in cases, such as Western opera, when the lyrics are narrative. In other words, whereas the languages of science, literature, theatre or cinema lend themselves to specific rhetoric types such as reasoning, narration and drama, music might call for a more sophisticated analysis yielding insights into that sort of ‘multi-vocal discursivity’ in which its argumentation is embedded (*ibid.*).

After collecting and classifying more than 50,000 *ovī* (dystichs) that constitute the textual content of these songs, we became aware that the analysis of this corpus requires an analysis of semantic and discursive contents, difficult to trace (to some extent, overlooked) in ordinary situations of speech communication (Poitevin 2000). For it would undoubtedly be short-sighted to reduce the syntactic/semantic effects of performed *ovī* to sub-forms of ordinary speech. Similarly, the fact that their musical content resists melodic and stylistic classifications does not imply that it only needs to be ‘straightened’ to fit into a pre-defined musical model, notwithstanding the versatility and proclaimed universality of the model.

Our hypothesis is that the discursive structure may emerge from looking at ‘text’ and ‘melody’ as inseparable dimensions of the performance. Words might contain clues to the study of intonation and vice versa.

## The Pre-recording Period

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Before we started audio recordings, the collection of data limited itself to the written transcription of song texts (*ovī*) and information about performers and their villages. This information is the major part of the computer database that is being used for various queries. Texts were written down by social animators, both women and men belonging to the same communities as our informants, who quickly became experts in transcription and analytical works. This expertise had an

important feedback on their social awareness and empowerment. In a group discussion (Pune, 5 October 1999) Kusum Sonavne and Tara Ubhe declared: 'Indeed, we started our movement with these songs because they were our only knowledge, but now we think about it and discover that these songs have multiple meanings.' This process of re-appropriation and adaptation to new contexts of social communication is central to the animation work of the Village Community Development Association (VCDA), a body coordinating several action groups in rural Maharashtra.<sup>2</sup>

The classification of song texts revealed a remarkable stability of these texts with respect to the place and time of performance. It is not uncommon to find the same *ovī* (with slight syntactic variants) in villages at more than 200 km distance, and a few texts have been traced for intact transmission over several generations. The stability of this repertoire is striking in two aspects: (a) its exclusively oral transmission; and (b) the distance between 'spoken text' (as transcribed) and 'sung text' (as performed).

When women stop singing and recite the text to facilitate its transcription, it is clear that they own an autonomous knowledge of text even though they may feel reluctant to detach it from the sung performance. They are aware of reciting 'songs', not 'verse'. In other words, what we would call the 'musical component', notably the tonal structure, is obliterated in this process. This should not be disregarded and taken to be lack of expertise in music, for the ontological question remains: What is 'music'? Notably when there is no 'audience' and no awareness of its 'performance'....

## The Analysis of Recorded Material

In 1996 we started recording entire performances of grindmill songs, taking advantage of digital audio technology for accurate indexing. The database of grindmill songs has been enhanced with information, giving quick access to the original soundtrack. This entire corpus has been transferred to an open-access sound archive.<sup>3</sup>

As far as tonal classification is concerned, earlier work on the melodic transcription and analysis of north Indian classical music served little purpose. Mapping melodies to ragas for the sake of retrieving similar ones would not make more sense than using a foreign scale system.

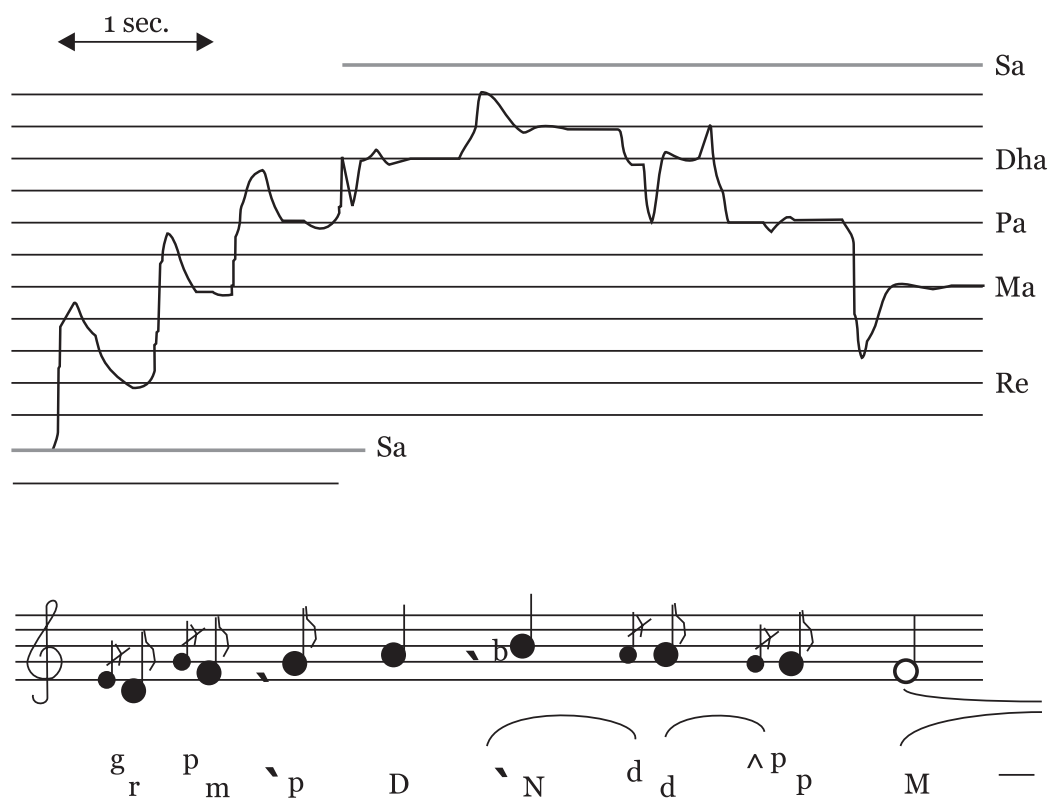
Many tunes, for instance, have scale features akin to raga Bhairavi although they diverge in their melodic phrasing (*aṅga*) and emotional content.

Still, Indian musicology has more to offer than a scale system. Pandit Dilip Chandra Veda (1901–93) suggested guidelines for a rational approach to the traditional raga system in north India (Van der Meer 1980). Characteristic features (*lakṣaṇa*) may be summarized as follows:

1. Time-independent Criteria:
  - i. Tonal structure: scale, consonance/dissonance, micro-intervals (*śruti*).
  - ii. The relative occurrence frequencies of notes (*bahutva* and *alpatva* in a broad sense).
2. Time-dependent Criteria:
  - i. Notes more frequent in the beginning (*graha*) or in the end (*nyāsa*) of phrases.
  - ii. The most frequent note on accentuated beats (*vādī*).
  - iii. Short melodic patterns (*alaṅkāra*).
  - iv. Characteristic melodic phrases (*tāna*).

It is obvious that all the aforementioned criteria—except perhaps *alaṅkāra*—only apply to musical material consistent with an idea of tunefulness achieved by classical musicians at the cost of years of formal training. It does not make sense to speak about the relative occurrence of a note when that note cannot be identified! A typical example (also found in other popular traditions outside Europe) is a commonplace ‘confusion’ of the minor and major third intervals above the tonic, namely ‘*ga*’ and ‘*komal ga*’ in *sargam* notation. Is it legitimate to name it a confusion, or is it just a case of ordinary variability that Western ears, whose sense of modality has been reduced to perceiving the minor/major dichotomy, tend to overestimate? Even *alaṅkāra* create problems because in vocal classical music they are constructed on relatively stable tonal positions that may be recorded as ‘notes’. Figure 6.1 displays a short phrase of raga *Āśa* sung by a female performer and transcribed by Bel’s melodic movement analyser (MMA). The Western staff notation and the ‘extended’ *sargam* notation on

**Figure 6.1**  
**Beginning of *Calana* (Raga *Āśa*) Sung in North Indian Classical Music (D.C. Vedi)**



Source: Bel, Bernard. 1988. 'Raga : Approches Conceptuelles et Expérimentales' [Raga: Conceptual and Experimental Approaches]. Actes, *Colloque Structures Musicales et Assistance Informatique* (Juin 1988 : Marseille, FRANCE): 87–108. Archived at <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00008280>.

Figure 6.1 seem perfectly coherent with the detailed melodic line, so that 'note treatment' may be conceptually distinguished from notes as such (Bor et al. 1985).

The melodic material of performed grindmill songs is far from lending itself to this type of differentiation between notes and note treatment. Therefore, a better way to go might be to rely on the idea of 'melodic phrasing' (*aṅga*), as it better reflects similarities between ragas that do not share the same scale structure, such as for instance *Todi* and *Bilaskani Todi*.

Veteran singers of grindmill songs seem to have developed vocal styles of their own reflecting personal concepts of 'musicality'. Women with a high social status often cultivate a voice culture and tunefulness that they perceive as characteristic of classical, *filmi* and temple

music, whereas women of lower status are more inclined to assert a 'personal commitment' to singing, thereby emphasizing the strength and personality of their voices, *apparently* at the cost of tunefulness. The reality is much more complex because the same woman may not sing in the same style on her own and in unison with other performers. As a rule, group singing seems to be conducive to achieving the standard of records of popular songs, including *bhajan* (devotional), *gawalan* (popular devotional) and grindmill songs, available in village shops and pilgrimage places.

Thus, we may expect to find several types of 'signatures' in the corpus of recorded grindmill songs: collective signatures emphasizing the performer's legitimate status as a member of a group (womanhood, village, caste, and so on), and individual signatures reflecting a process of appropriation of the act of speaking/singing. Among explicit collective signatures comes the stereotyped utterance 'I tell you, woman', defining a style of enunciation characteristic of the tradition of grindmill songs.

It does not stand as an utterance for one's own sake, private benefit or solitary satisfaction. It is a human agency where speech as an act tends to establish an interpersonal relation, a binding rapport between subjects. The addressee is therefore called to grant an active welcome to the testimony of an addressor who speaks out towards somebody. (Poitevin and Rairkar 1996: 256)

The background hypothesis of our research is that personal styles might be the outcome of trade-offs between 'music' and 'language'; namely, the normative framework of a tune against the fluctuant manifestations of prosody in the subjective dimensions of speech communication. Further, performers make use of specific musical effects to elaborate discursive elements that may support, and sometimes contradict, the discursive content of the song lyrics.

Communication in spontaneous speech bears some resemblance with singing at the grindmill both in terms of commitment of the speaker and the listener's adaptation to inaccurate syntax. The main parameters manipulated by speakers to enhance expressiveness are the ones belonging to the domain of speech prosody, both 'lexical' (word stress, tone and quantity) and supra-segmental or 'non-lexical' (intonation proper) (Hirst and Di Cristo 1998: 5ff).

To define melodic phrasing (*aṅga*) in grindmill songs, we would, therefore, need to search combinations of *melodic* and *prosodic* parameters. Indeed, these two notions borrowed from musicology and linguistics cover the same *physical* (acoustic) reality, namely, time/pitch structures, but the distinction makes sense at the *cognitive* (musicological/phonological) level. The bundling of these cognitive and physical aspects in either domain (musicology or linguistics) may be achieved under the common label ‘intonation system’. The following broad definition of intonation holds true with semi-improvised music:

On the physical level, intonation is used to refer to variations of one or more acoustic parameters. Of these, fundamental frequency (F0) is universally acknowledged to be the primary parameter. Many authors, however, have drawn attention to the pluriparametric nature of intonation which besides fundamental frequency involves variations of intensity and segmental duration. (Rossi et al. 1981; Beckman 1986)

Some authors in particular include under the term intonation aspects of temporal organisation or rhythm which besides intensity and duration may be reflected in variations of spectral characteristics such as for example distinctions between full and reduced vowels (Crystal 1969, Hirst and Di Cristo 1998: 2).

### *Handling Subjectivity in Speech Prosody*

Intonation may be considered a universal phenomenon with respect to languages and cultures since every language relies on an intonation system. Further, many of the linguistic and para-linguistic functions of intonation systems seem to be shared by languages of widely different origins, even though ‘the specific features of a particular speaker’s intonation system are also highly dependent on the language, the dialect, and even the style, the mood and the attitude of the speaker’ (Hirst and Di Cristo 1998: 1). Experiments have shown that the awareness of intonation is found in infants from an early age, as early as four days after birth—which suggests an acquisition during the last months of uterine life—and it is used by them to distinguish the prosody of their mother tongue from that of other languages (Mehler et al. 1988). ‘The prosodic features of a language are not only probably

the first phonetic features acquired by a child ... but also the last to be lost either through aphasia ... or during the acquisition of another language or dialect' (Hirst and Di Cristo 1998: 2).

These cognitive aspects of intonation lead us to construct the hypothesis that, in the absence of formal training, spontaneous speech and improvised singing may rely on communication skills acquired at the early stages of language acquisition. Similar skills are supposedly at work in the informal acquisition of elementary compositional structures of north Indian traditional drumming (Kippen and Bel 1989).

The grounding hypotheses of our cognitive approach to speech prosody (Caelen-Haumont 2001) are the following:

1. the speaker needs to make the message *known* (both making it *heard* and *understood*);
2. the speaker needs to make the message *believed*;
3. to be believed, a message needs to carry a *subjective dimension*; and
4. a great part of the subjective dimension lies in the Fo (fundamental frequency) excursion within lexical items (and other related prosodic cues).

The permanence and redundancy of linguistic/musical structures on the one hand, and the strength of the situation that greatly contributes to reducing ambiguity on the other, give the speaker/singer a relative freedom to disrupt the conventional framework. Phonemes are far from realizing their canonical forms, various disfluencies break the 'right' (in effect, textual or academic) linguistic structure, and lexical prosody often disrupts the syntactic organization. Nonetheless, spontaneous speakers understand each other well, and often better than in the conventional speech of readers. Since the language model and structures may (or may not) be activated independently from the effective realization of speech, speakers can 'appropriate' language forms at the acoustical, phonetic, prosodic, semantic, syntactic and/or emotional levels.

In dialogue conditions, it is observed that the form of speech is conditioned by the feedback about understanding or agreement that the speaker expects from the listener (Tomlin et al. 1997). In the new exploration of this domain, some studies in prosody show that all these means of omissions, substitutions, repetitions, breaks and

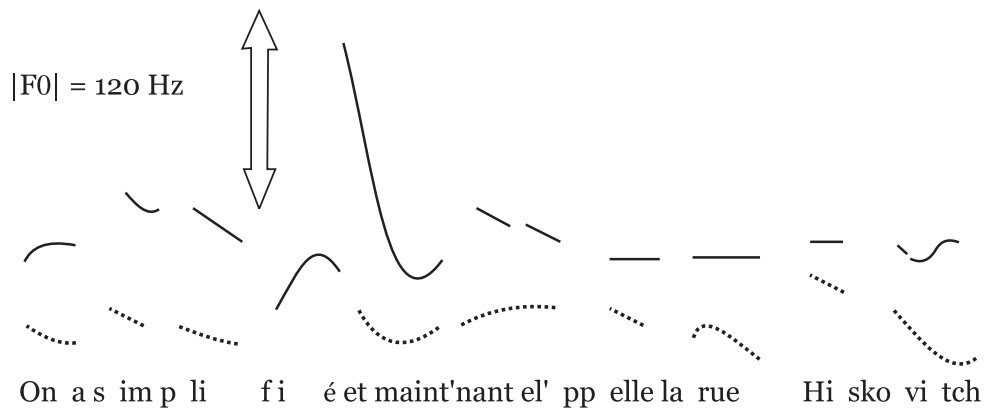
pauses, various noises and nonsense utterances, wide pitch excursions, supposedly disrupting the linguistic framework, lead on the contrary to better communication and interaction between speakers (Clark 1999, Fischer 1999, Jekat 1999), as they provide cues of synchronization between speakers, and perhaps also facilitate automatic recognition and understanding (Gallwitz et al. 1999).

Indeed, the choice of words, of phrase ordering and sentence structures—in other words, the semantic and syntactic means—contribute in framing out and casting the meaning in the most appropriate way. Still, all the para-linguistic and extra-linguistic stuff is superimposed to clarify, clearly disambiguate and capture meaning in a subtle, personal way. This stuff is the matter of shared codes; however, its use, occurrence and combination in the actual performance stand for an accurate and personal capture of sense. This capture outlines a sort of subjective space, whereby the only way to subjectively express meaning is to prosodically modify, release or set *against* the well-framed organization of linguistic units: for instance, using unexpected prominence with respect to the syntactic status of the word, or opposing a prosodic grouping (and/or pause) to the syntactic one.

As in other fields, in speech a person settles one's own identity by discarding common behaviour to some extent. A space remains free for each speaker, *given the linguistic rules and intonative background*, to disrupt and break down (or conversely to support and even to focus) the syntactic links between units (Caelen-Haumont 1981; Zellner 1997). In spontaneous speech, this space is prosodically outlined by the Fo range within words (in fact  $|\Delta Fo|$  because in this space the relevant information lies in the difference between Fo maximum/minimum, not in the direction of the Fo slope), and associated cues such as Fo maximum, duration and, occasionally, intensity, pause, downstepping.

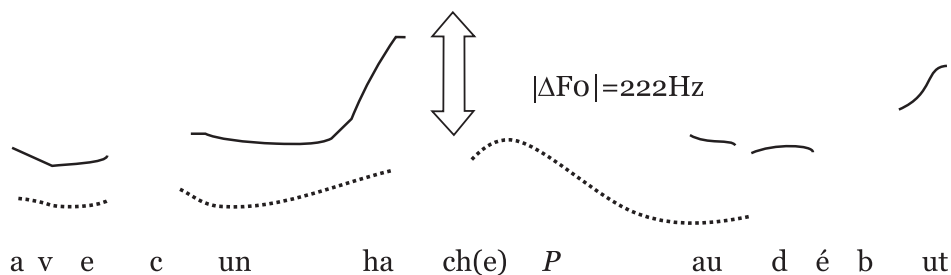
Figures 6.2 and 6.3 illustrate sudden rises of pitch associated with a speaker's expression of *irony*. The topic of this fragment of spontaneous speech is the renaming of a street, formerly '*rue de Lyon*', with a complicated foreign name, '*rue Hiskovitch*'. The speaker says: 'They simplified [it], now it is called *la rue Hiskovitch*, with a "h" in the beginning.' Dotted lines indicate the intonation that would be expected by a normative semantic model based on the *support/apport* information structure (akin to *topic/comment*; see Caelen-Haumont 2001) and occasional syntactic features. A slight rise of

**Figure 6.2**  
**Melodic Transcription of ‘On a simplifié, et Maintenant elle s’appelle la Rue Hiskovitch ...’**



Source: Developed by G. Caelen-Haumont.

**Figure 6.3**  
**Melodic Transcription of ‘... avec un “h” au début’**



Source: Developed by G. Caelen-Haumont.

pitch on the final syllable of ‘*simplifié*’ (simplified) was expected. However, the actual augmentation of pitch (120 Hz) is significantly higher, a deviation that is interpreted as an ironical tone. In contrast, ‘Hiskovitch’ is pronounced ‘flat’ in spite of its syntactic border position and the amount of information that is conveyed by its strangeness and usefulness to the listener, all concurring to predict a higher pitch on the first syllable.

In the second part of the sentence (see Figure 6.3), ‘with a “h” in the beginning’, the ironical tone is rendered by putting an emphasis on meta-linguistic information—the proper spelling of ‘Hiskovitch’ (phonetically ‘*hache*’, ‘h’). The pitch rise is even larger (222 Hz) and the break is accentuated by a pause before the remaining part of the sentence ‘*au début*’ (in the beginning).

### *The Intonation of Grindmill Songs*

In the examples shown in Figures 6.2 and 6.3, the dotted pitch line is the one predicted with the aid of models of ‘conventional’ intonation that take into account semantic and/or syntactic features. In sung poetry such as *ovī*, the syntactic structure is almost nonexistent, as will be demonstrated later. Therefore, the conventional tonal canvas is not a syntactic/semantic structure, it is the *tune* on which verses are sung. Most performers of grindmill songs find it difficult to abstract tunes from the lyrics of songs when prompted to do so in group interviews. Besides, it is not common to hear women humming tunes when they try to remember songs. In most cases, the song is remembered as an integrated object, even though occasional adjustments of the tonic and melodic patterns may be witnessed in the performance of the first distichs. In 1997 we worked with a talented *sarangi* player trained in both classical music and Punjabi folk. When confronted to the task of interpreting grindmill song tunes, he would listen to the recordings and write down not the *sargam*, but the phonemes he had been able to capture! It was unexpected that a musician trained in V.N. Bhattachande’s system of music notation would try to conceptualize songs in terms of textual rather than tonal content, the more so because he had no knowledge of the Marathi language.

In analogy with speech intonation, we may expect that the rhetorical processes at work in this form of singing are traceable in terms of ‘deviations from the tune’. This poses a great difficulty when tunes themselves are vaguely defined. There is no point in referring to a musicological model (such as *raga*) and normative concepts of tunefulness (unavoidably those of ‘art music’). Should we, for instance, declare that singing E flat (*komal ga*) instead of E (*shuddh ga*) is a significant deviation (as the minor/major dichotomy would suggest), or, on the contrary, that both E and E flat are equivalent positions in the tonal space of a particular song? There is no direct answer to this dilemma since performers are not able to articulate views on theoretical musical problems of this kind.

Still, there is no reason to be pessimistic if we only remember that ‘intonation’, in this context, is not just a matter of tonal positions and scales—a controversial topic that pervaded Indian (ethno) musicology for a long time (Bor 1988). Intonation comprises recurrent brief melodic patterns that may only be identified on visual transcriptions,

akin to pitch rises and falls in speech prosody. Furthermore, intensity, spectral characteristics (such as variants of vowels) and the timing parameters (both segmental and supra-segmental) should be taken into account. These events may be correlated with words or phrases that they might be stressing or unstressing and specific meanings they might convey in support to, or in contradiction with, the lyrics.

Since the syntactic structure is an almost negligible feature of performed *ovī*, it is realistic to look at the order and positions of words as constituents of the time structure itself.

## An Essay in the Interpretation of a Performance

These phenomena will now be illustrated in a real performance. The song represented in Table 6.1 was performed on 5 March 1997 by Janire Shahu, a woman from the Mahadev Koli (tribal) community in Rajmachi, a village in the vicinity of the Pune/Mumbai highway.<sup>4</sup> An indication of the expertise of this performer is that the regular text displays a great continuity in the sequence of images and ideas.

### Suggestive Expression

According to insiders' comments, the second verse, 'Lakshmibai has come through man's left leg', refers to the ritual way a couple enters the bridegroom's house, with the bride standing on the left side of her husband. Thus the figure of woman—Lakshmi, which in peasant women's imagination is associated with the evening, and the presence of cows in the stable as a marker of wealth in the farm, naturally triggers the evocation of a successful marriage. Here, the evocation is not a plain metaphor or metonym; it belongs to the category of suggestive projection (*vyañjana*) if we follow the *rasa-dhvani* classification of expressive forms (Ingalls 1990). With a sequence of only three words, *puruṣācyā ḍāvvyā pāyī*, repeated twice in the actual performance, the singer unveils a tiny fragment of a vast semantic framework that only experienced listeners are able to reconstruct with their own imagination (*kalpana*). This is a typical instance of a suggestive process extensively at work in *ovī* as a poetical form.

**Table 6.1**  
**Full Text on the Theme ‘The Coming of Lakshmi at Twilight’**

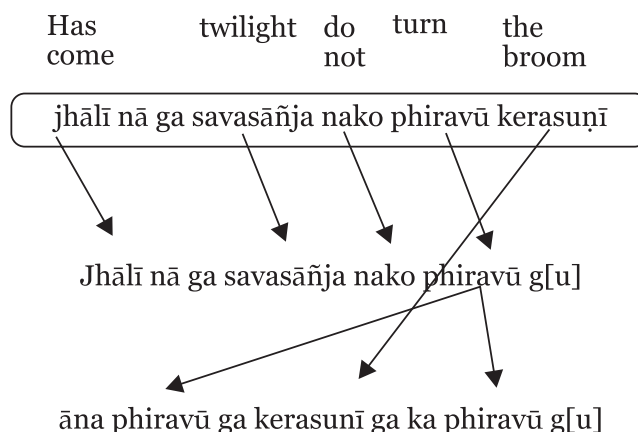
| <i>Marathi</i>                                                                             | <i>English</i>                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Jhālī nā ga savasāñja nako phiravū<br/>kerasuñī</i>                                     | It is twilight, do not sweep up the floor.<br>Woman, Lakshmi will go away from<br>my son.                           |
| <i>Bāī bālā nā ga yācyā mājhya<br/>Lakṣmī jāīla phirunī</i>                                | Lakshmi shall wonder: ‘Should I stay?<br>Should I go?’                                                              |
| <i>Jāū rāhū karīla jāū rāhū<br/>Sāṅgatē bālā tulā hilā gāyī<br/>gōṭhā dāvū</i>             | I tell you, my son, show her the stable<br>of the cows.                                                             |
| <i>Lakṣmībāī ālī culī bhānusī dētī citta<br/>Sāṅgatē bāī tulā baghatī tujha mata</i>       | Lakshmi has come, she gives heed to<br>the hearth.<br>I tell you, woman, she examines your<br>mind.                 |
| <i>Asturī puruṣācā yācā dōghācā<br/>ubhā dāvū</i>                                          | Husband and wife, they are constantly<br>quarrelling.                                                               |
| <i>Lakṣmībāī bōla mī tara ugāca<br/>ālē dēvū</i>                                           | Lakshmibai says: ‘My god! my coming<br>is useless.’                                                                 |
| <i>Lakṣmī bāī ālī ga karītī pāñī pāñī<br/>Dēvhāryācyā kōnā haṇḍa<br/>bharalanata dōnhī</i> | Lakshmibai has come, she asks for<br>drinking water.<br>In the corner of the god’s altar both the<br>jars are full. |
| <i>Lakṣmībāī ālī tāka māgatī<br/>piyāyālu</i>                                              | Lakshmibai has come, she asks for<br>buttermilk to drink.                                                           |
| <i>sāṅgatē bālā tulā ālī satava<br/>ghyāyālu</i>                                           | I tell you, my son, she has come to test<br>your <i>satva</i> . <sup>5</sup>                                        |

*Source:* All the transcriptions of grindmill songs may be accessed from institutional archive at <http://crdo.fr/crdo000735>.

## The Global Timing Structure

Figure 6.4 illustrates the difference between the regular text as recited by performers and transcribed by social animators (in the rounded box at the top) and the actual singing (the two lines under the box). Singers sometimes compare their performance to that of a shop-keeper unfolding pieces of cloth to make them look attractive. Thus, the verse is unfolded in two related occurrences. What is striking in the resulting structure is the treatment of the word *kerasuñī*, the broom. The word is not pronounced in the first line. The truncation of the end

**Figure 6.4**  
**The Third Verse: 'It is Twilight, Do Not Sweep Up the Floor'**



Source: Developed by the authors.

of the sentence, altogether a breach of syntax and semantics, creates a strong expectation of the seme.

The emphasis on *kerasuñī* is performed in an entirely opposite way in the next verse, as this word appears in a median position surrounded almost symmetrically by two occurrences of *phiravū*, another emblematic word. Interlocution particles *a*, *na*, *ga*, *ka* convey the broad meaning of personal emotional commitment. In addition, this median position of *kerasuñī* in the time structure of the tune makes it eligible for the same type of melodic ornamentation that will be granted to *phirunī* in the fourth verse (see later). Why is this image of the broom given so much emphasis? An immediate explanation was that the woman should not sweep the floor while she is waiting for Lakshmi because of the dust that might inadvertently pollute her guest. Informants also suggested that a house should never be too tidy as a mark of intensive activity, hence wealth. Our informants also acknowledged a metaphoric association between Lakshmi and the broom: in autumn peasant women celebrate Lakshmi and buy plenty of brooms for this occasion. The broom itself may therefore convey a symbolic connotation of housework being essential in the production of wealth, at the same time asserting the central role of women in this process. This may be put in contrast with songs evoking Ram at sunrise: his name is evocative of energetic daily moves, male precedence, need for brotherly companionship and guidance, sin, prayer and worship, all images which are absent from scenes of Lakshmi's visit.

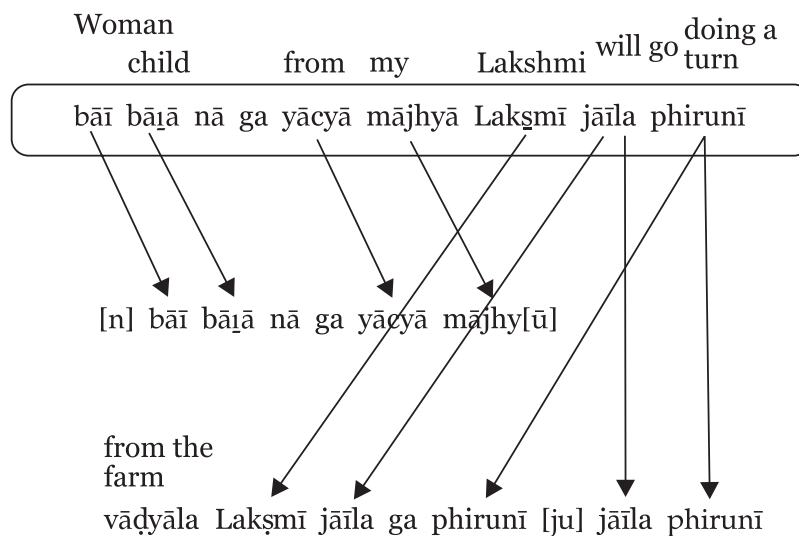
## Melodic/Prosodic Treatment

A finer analysis of the performance will be demonstrated in the next two verses. Figure 6.5 displays the sequence of words. Once again, the verse is split into two lines, with the first line exposing part of the argument. However, the second line is a noticeable expansion of a brief sequence of (again) three words, *Lakṣmī jāīla phirunī* (Lakshmi will go doing a turn) with particular emphasis on *phirunī*.

The first line is both syntactically and semantically incomplete. It is completed (semantically) with the second line thanks to the word *vāḍyāla* ('from the farm') that is unrelated with the rest of the sentence. In fact, this word is almost inaudible (not even transcribed in the recited text), but it was guessed by informants as it gives meaning to the preceding line. A conventional linguistic treatment would be to append *vāḍyāla* at the end of the first line, but here the tune discards it to a meaningless position in the second line. The tune calls a long vowel at the end of the first line, here vowel /a/ rendered as /u/ as per the stylistic signature of the tribal community this singer belongs to.

The most surprising feature of this verse is the emphasis put on the word *phirunī*, a declined form of *phiravū* that also played an important role when 'sweeping the floor' was rendered as 'turning the broom'. Thus, it constructs a sort of cyclic referential evocation of three semes: Lakshmi, 'the broom' and 'to turn'.

**Figure 6.5**  
**The Fourth Verse: 'Woman, Lakshmi Will Go Away from My Son'**

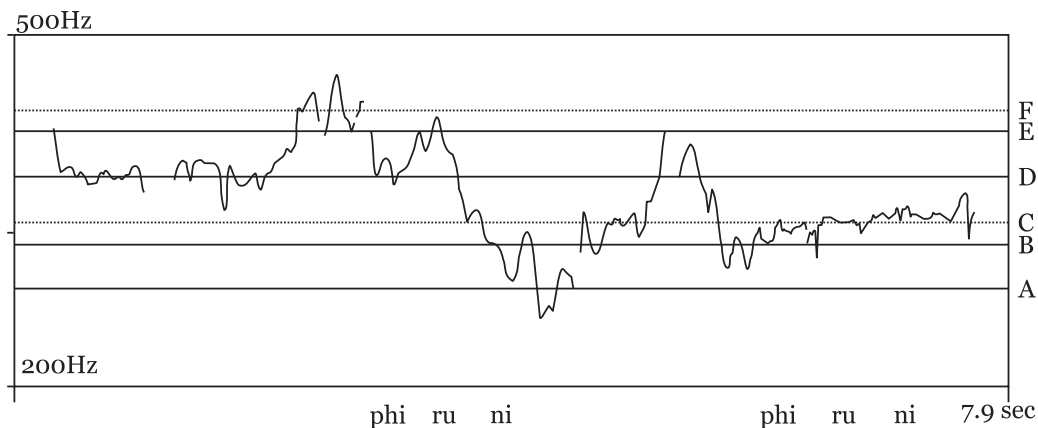


Source: Developed by the authors.

## The Tonal Structure

Even though Janire Shahu's performance would sound 'out of tune' to Western or classical Indian musical ears, a scale structure is recognizable and the tune may be reinterpreted on a melodic instrument such as the *sarangi*. A melodic transcription of the last verse is shown in Figure 6.6. The equal-tempered scale structure is marked with horizontal lines.

**Figure 6.6**  
**Melodic Transcription of the Bottom Line in Figure 6.5**

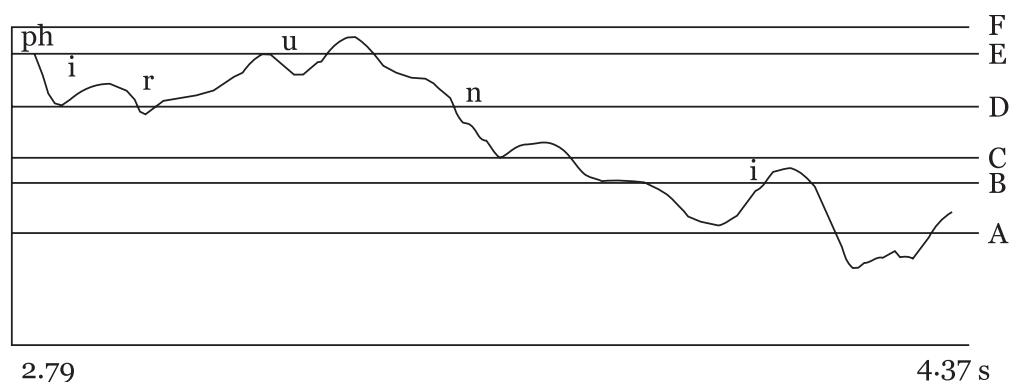


Source: Developed by the authors.

It is interesting to visually compare this transcription with that of *raga Āśa* in classical music (Figure 6.1) as both are approximately identical in duration. In classical music we used to determine the scale via a selective histogram of tonal positions over the entire performance (a *tonagram*, see Arnold and Bel 1983). However, doing the same with grindmill songs would not produce significant results for two reasons: (a) performers are not tied to a precise tonal reference, unlike the ones who sing with a drone (*tānpūrā*) or fixed-pitch instruments; and (b) there are very few sustained notes in grindmill songs, arguably because of prosodic features superimposed to the conventional musical structure.

The word *phirunī* is repeated twice in this bottom line (see Figure 6.5). As shown Figure 6.6, the second occurrence is almost flat—a 'conclusive' tone. In contrast, the first occurrence is melodically ornamented because of its median position in this part of the tune.

**Figure 6.7**  
**Detail of Median Occurrence of *Phirunī***



*Source:* Caelen-Haumont, Geneviève and Bernard Bel. 2000. 'Le Caractère Spontané dans la Parole et le Chant Improvisés: De la Structure Intonative au Mélisme', *Revue Parole*, 15–16 (2000): 251–302. Available online at <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00256388>.

The same ornamentation was used for *kerasuṇī* in the preceding distich. A detail of this ornamentation is shown in Figure 6.7.

The striking feature of this ornamentation on *phirunī* is its complexity given the short duration (2.2 seconds) and the apparent global structure of the tune. The line does move across the tonal space, but it also catches the tonal positions that may be used to notate this movement:

D E (F) (E) (D) C B A (C) (A) (B)

Approximate matchings are marked between brackets. This figure is a melisma as it displays at least five discrete notes for three syllables. Given the speed of the performance, this melodic pattern is not less accurate than fast movements in the performances of famous Indian musicians such as Kishori Amonkar or Sruti Salodikar (Arnold and Bel 1983).

## Conclusion

The foregoing analysis is a tentative description of phenomena recently observed thanks to the availability of accurate transcription tools. At this stage of research it is important to avoid jumping to early conclusions. Twenty years ago, after constructing the Melodic Movement Analyser,

yielding the same type of accuracy on vocal and instrumental music, the analysis of a wide corpus of north Indian classical music indicated that the modelling of scales and tuning schemes (*grāma-śruti*) was more complex than expected after analysing a few typical performances on the *rudra vīṇā* (Bel and Bor 1985).

The main motivation of this work is that it prompts new questions about the rhetoric of singing at the grindmill (Caelen-Haumont and Bel 2000) as well as the perlocutory values and functions of melisma in spontaneous speech (Caelen-Haumont 2002). These questions arise from the observation of almost unnoticeable aspects of the performance, for instance, the emphasis put on certain words or phrases ('man's left leg', 'don't turn the broom' and 'doing a turn') in which educated listeners may grasp layers of meanings not explicitly conveyed by the text. This is a domain of 'hidden' (domestic) knowledge that feeds back new insights to informants/analysts on their own culture.

## Notes

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1. Original text: '*Cette fiction s'informe à travers un propos que l'œuvre musicale singulière destine à des auditoires en se produisant comme figuration d'un monde possible tout en se projetant comme une "parole", qui se configure comme un "texte", dont le type discursif (figuration, narration, argumentation) est déterminé. Comme propos, comme quasi-parole, l'œuvre est destinée à des auditoires; comme quasi-texte, elle se configure, pour les besoins de cette "parole"; comme discours, enfin, dans le but d'optimiser les effets de la destination, elle détermine ses propres modes d'agencements textuels.*'
2. See the chapters by Hema Rairkar, Kusum Sonavne and Tara Ubhe in this volume.
3. The 'grindmill songs' corpus (ref. crdo000717) is available online at <http://crdo.fr>.
4. This recording is available from the CRDO website (<http://crdo.fr>), indexed UVS-28-07 and UVS-28-08 in the 'Grindmill songs' corpus. An in-depth discussion of the song text was recorded on UVS-44 (same corpus).
5. *Satva*: theoretically, the first of the three qualities constitutive of created beings, namely, that of excellence and goodness; according to Molesworth's dictionary of Marathi language (1986: 815), '[T]he principle to which are referred light, truth, real being, wisdom, purity, piety, probity ..., and all the virtuous and amiable sentiments and affections in animated beings.'

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**2.2**

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# 7

## GRINDMILL SONGS: A REFERENCE OF AUTONOMOUS SELF-INSIGHT

HEMA RAIRKAR

### 'One Should Talk with the Mill'

The age-old women's tradition of grindmill songs has proved down the centuries to be a privileged means of self-expression and communication for Indian peasant women. These songs were sung on the millstone at dawn by illiterate women while sitting and facing each other in a dark corner of the farmhouse, apart from men still asleep and more or less indifferent to melodies of housewives. They stand as a particularly significant emblem of cultural creativity and a striking form of traditional communication (Poitevin and Rairkar 1996: 113–37). Gender does not merely stand in that folk tradition as synonym to such sociological concepts as biological and social reproduction, division of labour, subalternity, and so on:

The chariot of Ram resounds for the grinding at dawn  
My mind feels transported to sing the verses.

O Lord mill, I battle with you  
I pull you, stone, to the rhythm of songs.

The early hours, from 4:30 a.m. till sun rises, belong to women as a time and space reserved for them alone to 'tell the world the recollection of my mother's songs':

O Lord mill, I try to set you in motion  
Sita, my mother, she sang to me the history.

Womenfolk all over the Indian subcontinent abide by a rule (apparently followed since the sixth century if we go by documentary evidence) that they have set for themselves of not 'giving the mill its feed in silence'. The rule in fact is not a rule but a compulsion to 'open up one's heart'. Singing while grinding is a frenzy.

'I do the grinding. Why should I do it?  
To tell you the sorrows of my heart.'

'I sang songs, pouring out my feelings.'

'While grinding at dawn, my mind is filled with exhilaration.'

While grinding and pounding, I opened out what was in my heart  
By dint of pulling the millstone, my throat has become dry.

This is not a mill but my hermit of yesteryear  
I confide to you fortune and misfortune of my heart.

The motor-driven flour mill puts an end to the grindmill. It extinguishes altogether the source of the living tradition of the songs of the millstone; the latter are doomed to sink into oblivion. Nothing can be envisaged to protect against this effect of modernity. The tradition cannot be kept in a state of artificial survival at the cost of housewives whose labour is happily alleviated:

By dint of grinding, one's skin hardened at the bottom  
In this day and age, the mill is fitted out with a belt.

Yet it is still time to collect and preserve that immense feminine memory of the songs as long as they continue to live deep inside the peasant womenfolk. Since 1983 we have embarked on a project of comprehensive archiving and study of those songs (text and context, musical and visual expressivity, content analysis and critical re-appropriation, and so on) in the Marathi linguistic area. As rural social interventionists we concern ourselves with appropriately inserting this rich input medium into the present channels and forms of communication, whether ancient or modern. There is still time to draw upon these songs and feed with them our own memory and information systems. This is our perspective at the confluence of women's power, cultural matrimony and communicative creativity.

## An Authoritative Reference

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The initial and essential motivation of the project had hardly anything to do with academic archiving and scientific processing as such. We were prompted to focus on that particular women's tradition when, in the course of exercises of self-introspection undertaken by women animators of the Village Community Development Association (VCDA)<sup>1</sup> on their own condition, we were amazed at the way those illiterate participants were drawing upon that tradition of songs as an authoritative reference to ascertain their statements and the authenticity of their testimonies. The peasant women were social actors confronted in their family and villages with a number of challenges raised against their commitment to intervene on their own initiative in the affairs of the village outside the boundaries of the domestic sphere. Once requested to collectively undertake a reflexive self-learning exercise to face these challenges better and rebuff objections, the songs of the millstone appropriately and effectively stood for the study-group not only as a precious means of communication and milieu of knowledge, but also as an oral text establishing with authority the relevance and credibility of their statements in a way comparable to the quotation of Vedic texts, the Bible or the Koran by their legitimate interpreters. This came as a surprise and a determinant discovery. An age-long spontaneous capacity of collective cultural creation of a socially repressed female population within a rural patriarchal society proved to be an asset and a firm ground for a critical analysis of gender issues articulated in modern terms and concepts of women's liberation (Poitevin and Rairkar 1996). The tradition was availed of by its direct heirs with a double effect of authorization and empowerment.

Since that initial experience, various activities of social action and research based on the grindmill songs made us realize that the practical relevance of such attempts and the ethical legitimacy of such investigation undertaken with and motivated by objectives of cultural action rest upon the continuity that prevails between an inherited collective self-memory and a modern critical self-assessment. On account of this homogeneity, more than preservation or glorification, let alone dubious concern for the exotic, the feminine tradition of grindmill songs lends itself to processes of reflexive reappropriation through analytical reassessment by the same peasant women. An indigenous capacity of heritage of one's own stands as an autonomous source

of knowledge. A traditional capacity of self-introspection sanctions and confirms one's permanent right to speak for oneself. A tradition of sharing between miller-womenfolk calling one another to witness together, as women, what they have to say in common links up directly to present practices of collective reappraisal and practices of social action. A new consciousness emerges on the ground of an age-old awareness of one's identity.

We discovered that the first constitutive characteristics of a pattern of valid cultural action that takes as its base an ancient cultural material, alien to the context and idiom of those who later on do try to avail of it (dramatists, filmmakers, social activists, musical composers, and so on) is the congenital affinity which prevails across the variety of idioms or circumstances, and transcends contrasting ideological backgrounds, contexts of civilization, systems and forms of communication. A genuine cultural action can exist only in continuation of in-built homologous urges, drives or representations, acknowledged and re-processed as endogenous stepping-stones. Failing this, the exercise will prove to be one of exogenous semantic over-imposition, external manipulation, allegorical use, academic utilization; in brief, appropriation by alien agencies for alien messages and alien purposes, and as a result reduction to a mere instrumental status.<sup>2</sup> This may be anything but cultural action.

Further questions to be raised in this respect relate to the nature and extent of this affinity; to the practical procedures and methods of collection, archiving and preservation capable of revealing and fostering this affinity; to the drives along which this homogeneity develops or thanks to which it reveals itself; to the cognitive modalities conducive to semantic reinterpretation of old representations. Here I try to address these queries.

## A Shared Self-insight

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A few examples dealing with gender issues will give a hint, first, of the deep affinity that links the feminine tradition of the grindmill songs to modern critical discourses. Second, they stress, with regard to processes of communication, the specific strength that concrete, poetic and symbolic images and direct speech give women's songs. The latter display

a capacity of effective sharing that is not only superior to conceptual articulations but is altogether of a different nature:

1. Insignificance, distress and dereliction qualify female existence. Such concepts as lack of status, gender discrimination and stigmatization abstractly convey the same import though with less communicative impact:

You may laugh and laugh again great delusion your laughter  
The life of a woman is fake, men bear no scars.

A father says: a boy is as good as gold  
A mother says: a girl's is a worthless life.

To be born a daughter to parents is to be born a whore  
How's the father to blame? It's the mother's womb that produces her.

I was born a woman, what way out can I find?  
I am not born a man, to go and find a job.

2. The lack of identity and recognition as a human entity happens to be bitterly felt when at the time of getting married a woman feels considered by men no more than an item with exchange value. A woman is handled as a commodity:

The father says: 'My child is a kid-goat I have raised.  
I'm going to the marketplace to sell you.'

A father gave over his daughter and took a hundred rupees  
The beautiful cow was tied up at the door of the butcher's house.

In the crowded marketplace, the father and son, that pair  
They didn't place the slightest value on my daughter.

3. The lack of authority is most severely resented when others, male or female, decide upon her fate with no consideration for her opinion. A woman is not meant for autonomy. Her status is instrumental to the ends of others. She is an object:

As a girl returns to her in-laws: 'I handed you over, woman,  
I am no longer answerable for your destiny.'

Woman, don't call your husband 'My Lord! My Lord!'  
Men are dark serpents, you don't know when they'll bite you.

4. Sexual repression is a pervasive means of subjection, the most effective way to enforce the 'laws of their status' on that 'stupid breed, these girls who know not their rank':

Could one call this youth? Never! But rather iron fetters  
No better than chains that bind the life of womankind.

Damn this youth! To blazes with this young bloom  
This is the curse on Gandhari from her mother.

5. Permanent hard labour with no respite nor appreciation makes a woman a mere 'beast of burden'. Her young energy 'burns away like a patch of greenery at the heart of a great fire':

A woman must never tire of grinding and pounding  
The twelve bullocks keep ploughing the fields.

I went to work; but what is the value of my work?  
Brother, I'm telling you, I'm as good as any man.

6. Despair eventually prompts a wish of self-annihilation and non-existence:

No! No! God! I don't want to be born a woman  
I tell you, it's a very hard lot to be one.

This brings home a few lessons. The tradition of yesterday is a springboard for tomorrow. The literary vigour and perceptive insight of the purely oral and feminine tradition of grindmill songs may help social scientists to transcend economic, Western or feminist concepts and lead them instead towards the genuine anthropological background that Women's Studies needs, to make progress. But this anthropological understanding is still all the more required from anyone involved in efforts of cultural action. Latent female potentialities, endogenous processes and autonomous aspirations prove to be the most appropriate grounds for effective cultural action, especially on the part of the same womenfolk.

Our experience has convinced us that the second principle of a valid pattern of cultural action is the anthropological insight of

those involved. Processes of psycho-cultural transformation ought to emerge from within as the offshoot of internal dynamics. Failing this, cultural action runs the risk of becoming an exogenous manipulation or brain-washing, and cannot adequately result in drives and social practices capable of affecting the overall environment. Facilitation by outside agents differs from external ideological control. In this respect, cultural action means three things. First, it is for those directly concerned with an introspective effort of self-reassessment resulting in a renewed self-consciousness: a self-generating process of knowledge; second, this reflexive self-investigation is possible only collectively, through interaction within study groups of women reappropriating their own memory and building up anew together their own identity. Finally, this knowledge cannot but directly lead on to appropriate action.

## Cooperative Research Action

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The mere collection of songs is itself a difficult task. It requires a scholar capable of going from village to village to meet those elders who remember the songs, and write down their songs in their own words. But how can one single scholar complete such an immense task when the quantitative extent of the tradition is tremendous?<sup>3</sup> We cannot expect village women to carry out a systematic collection either, let alone classification, and further embark on a valorization drive following preliminary analytical tasks required to that effect. Then, besides difficulties of time and material limitations of all sorts, cultural and linguistic differences immediately crop up as serious qualitative obstacles. The meaning of the words and the motives of the short couplets have often to be ascertained from singers as well as the contexts of their composition. Moreover, singers have developed attitudes of secrecy. They have their doubts in front of a person coming from a milieu alien to theirs: how will information and words collected be used? Taking over people's living heritage for purposes alien to the latter and its endogenous valorization is ethically objectionable. A sincere and familiar relation of companionship and fruitful cooperation ought to be built up. Still how, on what basis, and on account of what sort of legitimacy?

As a matter of fact, the collection, study and scientific processing of the songs could be carried only as an exercise of cultural action. The joint collaboration of women village animators in the whole process only made the latter significantly effective. These rural women, since the beginning, are the female animators of local action- groups that call themselves the Poor of the Mountain (sponsored by the VCDA in Pune district). Later on, male animators from VCDA and several other rural action groups, youth involved in social work, students and teachers from different parts of Maharashtra (as we shall see later) extended their cooperation as the project expanded in various directions. But the intermediary role of a core team of village women otherwise involved in social activities of a 'conscientization' nature remains essential on two accounts. Such collaborators (mainly but not only women—it is even essential that both men and women take part together, and that male youth too be actively involved) who have the confidence of the singers and speak absolutely the same language are needed for the collection not to be casual nor restricted to those formal songs which used to be easily given to visitors for reasons of external constraints, prestige, self-image or family pressure. Besides this, only those who grew up and have been nurtured in the same tradition and acquainted with the connotations and contexts of the songs can properly assess their meaning.

In fact, the participation of female and male social animators prove more than a practical necessity required for ensuring the authenticity, comprehensiveness and reliability of the data collected. It satisfies deeper and more congenial expectations shared by the methods of social action of the rural animators involved and the methodological profile of the project of collection of songs as well. Anthropological research becomes more relevant once those whose action is the focus of its investigation are not simply the objects of the knowledge that is sought, but become a party to the research itself. Far from being the matter (as informants remembering songs) or middle terms (as assistants collecting more relevant songs from other informants) of an exercise of construction of ethnographic knowledge, they intervene as a party to the research itself in one way or the other, from collection to analysis and later on to realizing audio-visual anthropological documents. Reciprocally, the elementary research procedures themselves facilitate and lead immediately to a sort of cultural awakening of the

informants as much as of the assistants when both of them develop an increasing cultural interest in the remembered, analysed, recorded or visualized material.

Let us insist on the mutual benefit that research and action draw from such mode of cooperation—a real communicative interaction between scientists and social practitioners. It meets, first of all, the methodology of action of the social actors. Their effort is one of analysis of the social and cultural realities of those whom they are bringing together for facilitating on their part a collective exercise of self-learning in any domain relevant to them, this self-learning further leading on to concrete social intervention. It was indeed during the course of one such effort that the idea of the collection of songs was born, as stated earlier. It is as partial contribution to the same process of self-investigation, ground of further collective social actions, that the interest for the songs as asset of cultural action gradually became an expanding scientific project. Right from the start, women animators realized the benefit that they would draw from their collaboration to the collection and study of songs.

On the contrary, one understands how the involvement of rural social actors turned out to be one of the best assurance of the scientific quality of the research work itself, from collection to classification, from analysis to anthropological intelligence, from social critique to cultural action and from singing to realizing the importance of the musical component of a communication process.

I may sum up by stating a third directive principle that experience taught us: effective cultural action cannot dispense with one form or the other of research action.

### *Analytical Reappropriation*

We cannot expect peasant women social animators to acquire overnight the expertise to avail of their ancient tradition of songs on the sole assumption that this tradition is theirs and carries hidden thoughts and emotions. Grindmill songs may enshrine perceptive views on women's life, but a proper and efficient reappropriation cannot be carried out without some systematic study once hitherto silent women have been called and enabled to openly speak out. Volunteers of the organization called The Poor of the Mountain ought to be trained to capitalize on them on the basis of their initial experience and use of songs in

local meetings. In study group sessions they were shown how to carry a content analysis of some sections of the corpus with the following questions as guidelines:

1. Which words use to carry which ideas?
2. What social realities and values stand behind them?
3. How and to what extent did women internalize that tradition?
4. What impact did those words have on them?
5. How did they structure the collective psyche of common women?

A few examples will give a hint of this type of content analysis and of its potential for activities of cultural action. First, here is a short excerpt of a study of songs classified<sup>4</sup> under the title *Woman Unwanted at Birth*. The question raised was: which basic words are used for a woman? What meaning do they convey?

- Log of wood, *lākud*: Destined to be burnt in the hearth; in other words, sacrifice one's life through dedication to one's domestic duties.
- Trade, *vyāpār*: Meant to be sold; handed over in marriage to the in-law's family.
- Body, *piṇḍa*: The person with its particular nature and attributes.
- Palanquin, *pālkhi*: To depart from this world.
- Cremation ground: Death.
- Difficulty, *sākaḍ*: Hardship.
- Box of jewels, *rathnapetī*: Particular appreciation or affection for a girl.

But for one exception, all the words are negative and, moreover, express feelings of despair. The word 'destiny' is used as synonym for misfortune. The analysis goes on articulating the semantic connotations of the words used in the category under consideration. Four kinds are distinguished: (a) one can but helplessly accept the birth of a girl; (b) total negativity and rejection; (c) nothing is in our hands; and (d) acceptance with joy (only one such song).

Similar questions are raised about the set A:II-2.1 relating to a pubescent daughter and the parents' consequent anxiety. Derogatory words are associated with a pubescent girl:

- Shackle for animal, *khodā*: A girl is an embarrassing appendage.
- Load, *bhār*, *ojhe*: A dead weight for her family, no profit or use, only a liability.
- Elephant, *hattī*: Parents would find easier to maintain an elephant; a daughter brings with her too many problems that they cannot cope with.
- Sour lemon tree: Parents become aggravated on account of too many worries.
- Knife, *surī*: Risk of being ‘stabbed’, disregarded or branded by her misbehaviour.

The general context of these representations is the mother’s worry about the youthfulness of her daughter. The female youth is described as a ‘blossoming mango’, ‘fruit of the tamarind tree’, ‘*corinda* fruit’, ‘ripe millet’, and so on. It is for these reasons the mother is frightened: society at large may take advantage of her daughter. If some male has a close relationship with her, her whole life will be ruined. Mothers curse the youth of their daughter, although the coming of age for a girl is a happy event for both of them. But the repressive norms and representations enforced by the systems of social control turn the joy of that event into a deadly fear.

Once deep insight is reached through relating the songs to the social and cultural symbolic systems of communication of the society at large, animators feel confident of their capability to appropriately make use of them in the course of cultural action programmes. One can then proceed with the songs in three stages. First, animators can simply read out songs from one classification set, all having exactly the same meaning. The audience of village women assembled for the occasion may then remember some new songs with a similar meaning but different words, or songs called to memory by any form of association (words, ideas, feelings, circumstances, and so on). Those songs are then written down to be added to the corpus. Second, some participants may express their reactions and make comments. The latter are noted down to be further reported and considered in the next study group meeting of the team of animators involved in the whole programme. This leads us to understand further what is deeply rooted in their minds. The third stage is the most important. Whenever possible, animators conducting

the meeting take the discussion further, starting from the reactions expressed. A few concrete examples of that third step follow.

Saru Kadu can neither read nor write, but knows thousands of songs. In four villages located deep in the mountain area she used a file in which songs were classified, asking someone else to read the songs once people had assembled. The subject was: Why society discriminates between a boy and a girl. In the ensuing exchange, she tried to convince the audience that ultimately there is not so much of a difference. To support her view that a son does not necessarily mean more happiness in the old age, she says: 'Have we not composed the following song':

In husband's kingdom, I can draw from the reserves at will  
In the kingdom of the son, I have got to sit in the corner.

In another village, as soon as the lady animator started to read a class of songs from the file, the assembled women remembered sayings instead of songs. The subject was behavioural norms controlling women's movements. The sayings were stating these norms in brief. The following points were discussed: Who has prepared these norms? How are they passed on to the population? Whom do such norms benefit? If these norms were changed, what reactions would they create in society? The songs acted as a sparkle that kindled wide debates.

Women animators use files on which the songs are recorded with the names of the women from whom they have been collected and their villages names. The file may become a prestige symbol, particularly when the news is conveyed that the files of classified songs are being used in different parts of Maharashtra: 'Our names and capability to create songs are shown to other people. This is an honour as our name and village are mentioned in remote places all over the state.'

In the beginning, there was some suspicion about the organizational work in general and women's participation in particular. A usual question was: 'You, women, what can you achieve? You do not understand the complexities of the problems. Your domain is only the household.' The same opponents realize that, thanks to the grindmill songs, those women are known and respected, and, moreover, have acquired some personal prestige in a wider area. Women animators are credited with that achievement.

In a village named Nandgao, in a Mahar (untouchable) quarter, a file of songs was read during a women's meeting by Kusum Sonavne.

The immediate reaction of the audience was: 'Give us this file. At the time of marriage, we shall keep it before us and sing those songs. Youths install a loudspeaker when there is a festival or a marriage. All people can listen to the songs. Some words are impressive.' Peasant women, thus, realize the value of their own traditional creation once placed in front of them in a written form: the beauty of the words, the quality of the composition, the strength of its structure strikes their mind as never before.

In a big gathering of women Saru Kadu showed a file of songs, telling her audience that:

[W]e have created them and kept them in our memory. This shows that we are not ignorant. If we compose songs, this shows that we can create something. We can take into consideration many facets of our everyday life. This shows our creativity. Our power to think, remember, understand can be utilised in other ways nowadays. If we start paying attention also to the wider problems of our community, our village, *taluka*, etc., can we not become as much successful in tackling these issues? The composition of these songs shows that we have a basic intelligence of our life. What remains, is only to use our capabilities to understand the questions of the community at large and find ways to solve them. If we are decided, the passage is easy from the songs to these activities of animation.

Women animators who, like Saru Kadu, can neither read nor write are particularly convinced that grindmill songs are a very effective medium. Theoretical subjects tackled with abstract words in general meetings prove difficult to remember, but once we try to put forward songs appropriate to the subject under consideration, women animators can immediately remember the exchanges that took place and how they were discussed. Paradoxically, we observed that illiterate women are those who make the most effective use of the files of collected and classified songs in their work of social and cultural awakening.

When rural women animators generalize their experience and its benefits, they stress the following points. A number of songs run down the girl-child, but many songs also praise the same girl-child. Why not choose songs of the second category as a vehicle for exchanges during women's meetings: they may hopefully pave the way towards transforming the prevailing derogatory views about girls and women. Similarly, women sing on the grindmill the qualities of a brother,

but they would not directly convey to him such sweet feelings. Songs are the best way to express them. Young housewives have to face troubles at their in-laws'; this harsh experience is better articulated and denounced through impersonations of Sita's character and life. Grindmill songs prove one of the best roundabout ways to convey emotions as much as to carry out social and cultural analyses of women's problems in an inhibiting patriarchal rural setting.

## Bridging Communication Gaps

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A host of students in urban and rural colleges equally mindlessly turn their back on their mothers' past experiences. On the other hand, modern intelligentsia sometimes looks for moorings. The urban and rural divide adds to the generation gap. Grindmill songs can contribute by throwing a bridge across so many rifts for the next generations to draw upon the heritage of their ancestors. With this in view, contacts are established with mofussil colleges in various parts of Maharashtra for giving lectures to college students on the cultural relevance of grindmill songs. A team of VCDA animators, male and female, hardly educated, who participate in the valorization programme in Pune district narrate their own personal experience in front of hundreds of college students. This contributes in many respects to bridging several communication gaps at a time. In general, students show a genuine interest and attend in large numbers; some volunteer to collect songs. Lectures are always followed by lively discussions.

Among questions raised by students, one is worth quoting:

We are confused. Everybody tells us to fight against superstitions, that tradition is a burden that keeps backward. We are asked to look forward towards the twenty-first century by relinquishing backward ideas and practices, and concern ourselves with ideas of development. But you tell us to follow and strengthen the tradition. What is true and whom to follow?

Discussions are on in many progressive circles about 'people's superstition' that social workers are vehemently engaged in fighting against. Generally any traditional belief or behaviour can be labelled as superstition under the spell of concepts of rationality used in Europe at

the time of the Enlightenment. A dichotomy is emphasized between tradition and modernity. On the other hand, the glorious past of twenty centuries and its superiority is being unilaterally proclaimed. Official discourses are filled with praises for the dominant culture, while from other quarters common people are branded as backward and called to get rid of the shackles of the past. Students naturally get entangled in such complex ideological propaganda and have neither opportunity nor means to critically analyse the situation. They are rarely taught to assess so-called superstitious practices with any anthropological insight.

Male social animators of VCDA were of the opinion:

You talk about development. We can take an example. A first weapon was created by the ancient human beings for protection against wild animals. Slowly the weapons were used to establish power and authority. Today people are producing very costly weapons which will destroy the world. The nations who cannot afford it also want to be in the race. Can we call this development?

But women animators continued questioning:

After all, who takes the decision and for whose interest? A handful of people, and they talk for others. In our country, for example, higher-caste people, and especially men among them, are glorifying our ancient culture and tradition. The tradition which we want to cherish and strengthen is the tradition coming from those sections of society kept mute and denied expression. Such traditions show us the way for changing the relation of the dominant and the subaltern in the present society.

## A Variety of Strategies

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To conclude, let us just stress the relevance of a multiplicity of approaches and methods.

## Dramatic Performances

The social animators of VCDA prepared a street play on the issue of deserted women, integrating into it a few adequately selected grindmill songs that they sing during the performance in order to better convey

their message. They generally performed their drama in bus stations, marketplaces and public squares, where people naturally gather. Sometimes women from the audience spontaneously join the actors in singing with them the grindmill songs. Once only a performance was given in Pune as an opportunity for the women actors to project in their own words the peasant woman's condition to an urban audience from a higher caste and class. It was a matter of surprise and pleasure for the latter to realize in particular the advantage the group took of traditional folk songs to carry modern messages. Some women from among the audience remembered that their grandmothers were singing the same type of grindmill songs.

## Visual Documentation

A one-and-a-half hour documentary video film *Living Memory* has been prepared with the cooperation of the women singers, which is shown in villages. With the process and method of collection, it visually displays women's lives that the songs project. The screening in villages contributes to maintain the dialogue among women that the songs carried.

As a significant instance of people's reactions to the screening I would like to mention the experience of Chandrakant Kokate who showed the video film in a village of Shrirampur *taluka*, Ahmednagar district. A large number of grindmill songs were included. When they started viewing the film, the women from that village were amazed to discover that the songs recorded in the video document were exactly the same as their own songs. They then accused Kokate of having stolen their songs and given them to the women in Mawal. As a rule, poor peasant women rarely travel and visit areas located far away from their own villages; they are acquainted only with the immediate surrounding villages. Therefore, they could not imagine or believe that other women residing in villages 500 km away could ever sing the same songs. The video document served at least one purpose that day: it established the obvious fact of the universality of oral tradition and led to a strong feeling of togetherness. Some of the women requested Kokate to include them in the 'cinema' as they could also sing the same songs as the other women seen on the screen, who did not differ from them at all. Only one old woman explicitly refused to 'go into the cinema'.

She was ready to tell songs to Kokate, but did not welcome the idea of being seen in the 'cinema'.

## Musical Documentation

The oral tradition of the grindmill songs also carries a tradition of folk music. Women do not only open their heart and communicate through poetic compositions, they transmit the songs to one another as musical compositions. Word and tune are not to be dissociated. The tunes and rhythms play a pivotal and no less significant role in giving that tradition the status of a means and milieu of communication. We have already stressed the importance of this with regard to a study of the structures of effective communication.

Moreover, the tunes should not be considered as mere musical performances any more than the text of the song can be considered a literary achievement. Neither of them was for the women singers. Both literature and music jointly serve a triple purpose of spontaneous expression, symbolic creation and free communication.

Third, the variety of tunes is astonishing. Tunes may be related to the mood of singers, the meanings of the songs, the musical environment of a group of singers in a particular area, their family status, the ritual context, local musical influences, the more or less hard cereal that is ground, etc. The tunes greatly vary in the same area and from area to area in the same way as do the words of the distichs. A study of that musical spontaneity and creativity cannot be omitted. Morphologically, the musical variety analogically parallels the lexical variety characteristic of the poetic compositions, whether we consider the glossary or the imagery. A process of communication is powerful not as transfer, but as innovation and creativity through its variety. We ought to take measure of this by studying the flexibility of musical forms.

In short, the remarkable linguistic and musical wealth of the tradition of grindmill songs shows that communication calls for reciprocity, exchange and therefore invention instead of being just informative or didactic. The tradition of grindmill songs is a remarkable milieu of communication to the extent it tends to be performative of a personal relationship within the context of domestic duties incumbent to peasant housewives.

## Notes

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1. The VDCA is a non-governmental organization among lower sections of village communities in Pune district that supports activities like people's education, cultural awakening and social action, in particular those of the spontaneous local groups associated under the name of the 'Poor of the Mountain'.
2. A patent example is the allegorical treatment of the act itself of grinding by *swamis* and *pandits* absolutely at variance with the symbolic import that it carries for the peasant women who grind and sing. See Poitevin and Rairkar (1996: 25–90).
3. The single corpus of reference that tries to exhaustively cover a cluster of only 131 villages and hamlets in Mawal area (Mulshi *taluka*, Pune district, Maharashtra) comprises of more than 32,000 distichs as of today, and is not yet complete though collection started in 1983.
- 4 See Mawal Reference Corpus RC/M, A:II-1.1 Institutional archive available online at <http://crdo.fr/crdo000735>.

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# 8

## FROM GRINDMILL SONGS TO CULTURAL ACTION

TARA UBHE

### Linking Up with Words of Yesteryear

Retrieving and collecting grindmill songs turned out to be an effective medium of social awakening for rural women. In this chapter, I sum up our initial experiment with the songs as a congenial way of initiating contact and exchange, especially with older women who would not otherwise be receptive to modern words and perspectives.

We started the animation work ten years ago and have maintained our commitment since then. In the beginning we were new to the whole concept, but with a decade of experience behind us now, we have learnt how to be effective in the process of animation work. If our intention is that rural women should accept us in our role as animators, and not only as rural women as themselves, we have to resort to some media for convincing them about the genuineness of our work. Indeed, we wish to transmit to them what experience and knowledge we have acquired in the process of animation work.

With this purpose, we started, in particular, participating in the work of collection and valorization of grindmill songs. All of us, as much as other women in the villages, know them by heart. This oral tradition of ours became a useful medium in the meetings of the rural women of

different villages and hamlets of the Mulshi and Mawal *talukas* of Pune district, the area where we do our animation work. Let us give some concrete examples.

In a village a meeting of women was organized. They requested us that they should be let free to go home at 10 o'clock in the night because they were tired after a whole day's hard work. In the course of the meeting, one of us sang two grindmill songs with reference to the point which we were putting forth, and they literally electrified the whole atmosphere:

At the heart of a huge fire, the tender areca nut burns away,  
There's no appreciation for a girl's labours at her home or at her  
in-law's.

Engulfed in flames, a patch of greenery burns away,  
Wherever a woman goes, she must toil.

The meeting went on until 1 in the morning with the participants in the meeting exclaiming: 'You started singing our songs and then, we never realized how time passed!'

In another village, women gathered in one house where the verandah was large enough to accommodate forty to fifty people. Before we started the meeting, the lady from the house said, 'You had better choose another house for the meeting. I have to get up early in the morning.' This was given as an excuse for not participating in the meeting as she was afraid of doing so. We shifted to a nearby house and started our discussion. While discussing, we sang some grindmill songs:

Mother and father say: 'Daughter, you must die there,  
where we handed you over,  
The firewood must burn away in the hearth.'

You endure *sāsurvās* [harassment at in-laws' house]

What will happen if you bear it?

What will happen if you bear it? One obtains *devpaṇ* [godly status].

As usual, women participated. The meeting became very lively. Next morning, the same lady who had been listening from her house, told us, 'Excuse me, I should not have insulted you. I was listening and

now I am convinced that your animation work is useful to the village. You were using our tradition.' We told her, 'It is not your fault. You have never been exposed to any other type of gathering and any other type of thought process. That is why you objected. If you are convinced yourself, you can join us and start attending our meetings and gatherings.' Since some months now, she regularly attends our meetings.

In yet another village a women's meeting was going on. Some adolescent girls peeped in and slowly entered the room. Immediately, the elder women scolded the girls and wanted to drive them out. We remembered one grindmill song:

Born a girl, you are too effervescent,  
The earth implores pity: 'Step lightly, my child.'

We quoted this song and commented upon how, 'We are taught to repress girls. In our meeting, we have to think of the reasons behind it.' We continued on the subject and women participated.

Childhood is a kingdom, the best kingdom among all kingdoms  
Let youthfulness be burnt! Youthfulness stands guilty.

Talking openly of girls' socio-cultural repression goes against prevailing normative culture, but the women liked the discussions and as a result remained in contact with us since then. It appears that they appreciated the method that we followed as well as the content of the meeting.

When we use grindmill songs, the women participants go on singing. We then try to make use of those songs that may help us put forward some analytical or critical points. For example, we use the following songs:

What fool decided that a woman's life should be?  
At her parents' or at her in-laws' she labours for life like a bullock.  
A woman's life! If I'd known, I wouldn't have been born,  
I'd have become a plant of sacred basil at god's door.

We continue asking questions: Why do we regret our own birth? What, then, about our existence? How does society ask us to work like

bullocks in an alien house? When such questions are raised in the meetings, the women gathered start thinking over it. They feel surprised at how these songs can be related to their own problems and their own mindsets. They always express the following reaction:

Really, we have never understood own grindmill songs in this perspective. The questions posed are genuine. 'We are used to open up our minds in these songs. The only thing is that we have not looked at them in this way. They certainly help us understand our own condition better.'

The reinterpretation of the same songs that women have been singing for generations provides the basis for starting a thought process in different and new directions. For example:

This is not a millstone, but a hermit from the mountain  
I tell you, woman, open your heart to him.

We tell women in village meetings that:

While singing like that, we open up our heart to the stone. Now, slowly, this place of expression is vanishing. Millstones have gone, flourmill has come. Then, we have to find another place to express our minds and share our sorrows and joys. There are many question marks before us and we have to face them. Meetings like this can provide us with another space.

## The Evidence for Critical Reassessment

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Recalling songs in village meetings re-activates memory, boosts awareness and constructs a common identity among peasant women. Yet songs should not be resurrected only for the sake of their last female heirs, nor restricted to communication with an illiterate or half-educated rural population. What illiterate women expressed for themselves, as a collective soliloquy, can now be addressed to all those who are still used to overlooking the significance of their songs. It is in particular our task as women social animators to show the relevance of our mothers' and grandmothers' tradition to an academic society of professors and scholars concerned with women studies, folk culture,

popular literature, oral social history, subaltern studies, cultural anthropology, and so on. Songs are an asset for common women to establish communication with the academic intelligentsia—two worlds that stand totally apart from one another to the detriment of genuine anthropological knowledge.

As an example, the following list is from a presentation that we made at Nanded (Maharashtra) on 3 January 1995 in the course of a seminar on the ‘Collection and Study of Grindmill Songs: A Perspective’ organized by the Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (CCRSS) with the departments of sociology and Marathi literature of the People’s College. For a hint of the rhetoric and style of expression characteristics of the grindmill songs as a symbolic system of communication, we presented words that cross the mind when a girl-child is born. They are all related to expressing disgust and helplessness. The following keywords testify to the impressive cognitive and communicative power of most common words, images and literary similes:

1. **Body/being:** God finally decides upon the form that takes the body (piṇḍa) of a girl. Nothing can be done about it. A song says:

The hope was to have a boy, a daughter broke it  
Why to blame her? God has created her being.

2. **Lineage:** The word is usually associated either with light or darkness. The son should maintain the lineage. He is the light of the lineage. A daughter spells darkness.

Our hope was to have a boy, the myna came, a daughter  
Mother-in-law says: ‘The lamp is blown off from my bed.’

3. **May she die:** The birth of a girl is so resented that one wishes her death as soon as she is born.

Mother-in-law says: ‘That girl has come, isn’t it?  
Now, woman, when shall her palanquin go?’

The word palanquin here stands for the stretcher that carries the corpse in a procession towards the funeral ground. The assumption is the

inhuman feeling that the girl's life, instead of growing, should perish, be nipped in the bud. Her existence is worthless. Four comparisons are borrowed from the vegetable world to convey her no-value.

4. **Bran of *ragi*:** A girl is a like bran of *ragi* or red millet. It is a good nutritious grain, but its bran is bitter. While pounding *ragi*, if the bran happens to touch the body, one feels an itching sensation; the throat begins to irritate. Thus the bran is only worth being thrown away as it carries no value. Such is the case with a woman.

The bran of red millet is of no use whatsoever  
O king Ram, why do you give a woman life?

Sita has only bran of *ragi* to eat when she is sent away by Ram to suffer alone her forest exile (*vanavās*). Such was the hardship of her exile.

5. **Flower of *ramita* tree:** This flower is found in the region of Mulshi *taluka*. The tree (*Erioccephala*) is of no use.

A child plucks flowers of jasmin and champak to play  
But the branches of *rāmītā*, woman, go as fuel only.

If ashes of *rāmītā* are applied on the face, it leads to a burning sensation and cracks develop on the skin. A saying circulates in our area that asks to guard one from 'offering that tree to god or giving it to eat to human beings'.

6. **Wild fig:** A girl is compared to a wild fig; one may eat a garden fig but throw away a wild one. Wild figs spread a cover of sludge under the tree. They ought to be cleared away like mud.

Both garden fig and wild fig are one and the same  
Here is the garden fig in bloom, the muck of the wild fig

7. **Thorny shrub (*cilār*):** The *cilār* is a thorny shrub only useful for planting around fields as a fence. Its thorns can tear out cloth, but are difficult to remove. Used as fuel, it throws out

sparks. This results in trouble. A woman is at the image of the *cilār*.

What to tell you, woman, the thorn of the *cilār*  
No son to keep the lineage, what's the use of a girl?

**8. Bother:** The birth of a girl is not a happy event; she is synonym for difficulties. She appears as an obstacle, a source of trouble, headaches and hindrance, not only for her mother, but for the rest of the family too.

In the middle of the fire, wet wood burns  
The birth of a girl, a bother for the clan.

**9. Second marriage:** If a first wife does not give birth to a son, one should immediately envisage taking a second. To beget a boy is of utmost importance. What is a woman? If one has been brought home already, nothing prevents from bringing a second one.

The hope was to have a boy, mother-in-law is angry  
I tell you, my son, be prepared to take another wife.

**10. Adverse fate:** To be a girl is a matter of misfortune. The fact itself is a basis for being blamed or considered faulty. Several words are commonly used with reference to that fatal misfortune, *bhogavaṭā*, *naśīb*, *bhog*, with the same attribute, *vait*, meaning 'bad' with connotations of all kinds: wrong, defective, injurious, detrimental, harmful, guilty, and so on.

I gave birth to a daughter, the fate apportioned to me  
A thorn has been brought, come on! pierce my nose!

**11. Madness:** Once a mother has a baby girl, she becomes almost mad.

Birth of a son, sweet mango tree  
A daughter is born, I go mad.

Does a mother really feel like becoming mad when she has a girl? With the norms that she has internalized, she also expresses what she actually feels:

The hope was of a boy, my daughter has come  
 Now, my dear woman, who could be weary of you?  
 The mother gets a boy, the property gets an owner  
 In her womb no daughter, closed is her path to heaven.

The belief is that a woman should have a daughter to open her path to heaven by her crying out in grief when at the time of death she is taken to the cremation ground. A boy is welcome to look after the estate and manage the household as its owner, but it is a love relation that binds mother and daughter. A son is expected out of social constraint, but in her heart a mother loves her daughter.

The hope was of a boy, why is a girl discredited?  
 Oh no! my woman! you are my heart's diamond.

Though a son is born, what will his mother actually gain from it? She may have got a boy, but for all that her poverty is not likely to disappear; we do not see her, for example, all of a sudden becoming a builder:

The hope was of a boy, Parbati a daughter was born  
 Where did the mother with a son erect buildings?

A woman is aware in her mind of her qualities and strength, but she fears society and because of social pressures she says that she cannot achieve anything:

I was born from a tiger, I take off like a tiger  
 What to tell you, woman, I am born a woman.  
 I was born from a tiger, mine is like a tiger's jaw  
 What to say, woman, I fell in woman's bondage

A woman is subject to restrictions. She is 'fallen under control'; in other words, 'she sank into madness' and 'she is kept under constraints'—these are common expressions. As a consequence, she can not achieve any thing. In our present terminology we say that 'society looks down

upon her', considers her 'an inferior being', keeps her 'lagging behind as backward'. But there is no need for such clumsy words to express this. In the grindmill tradition this is articulated with simple words that are used every day. It is, thus, not difficult at all to convince them of this.

When you agree with us and acknowledge that our mothers and grandmothers have composed that living tradition while sitting at the millstone in the early morning, you are tempted to ask why then did they not act against this tradition. Our answer is that society was keeping them in check and they were not given any chance to react. They understood that very well, and spoke up only in a dark corner of the house and at a time when the men were still sleeping. Nowadays, ideas are changing and there is more freedom. We toiling women wearing nine-yard saris take time to think for ourselves. We have started investigating and seeing through the trickery that stands behind what was received as truth yesterday. Who did this and for whose vested interests? A few of us are gathering to study this. But how do we make our observations reach out to other women? We resort in particular to grindmill songs.

# 9

## A REACTIVATED PERFORMANCE CAPACITY

KUSUM SONAVNE

### The Plight of Deserted Women

Barring a few remote villages, by and large, singing songs of one's composition while grinding is disappearing as a living performance in western Maharashtra. Still, the creative capacity that carried that tradition is not altogether extinct; neither is its communicative potential. As evidence of this, what follows is the content analysis of a set of twenty-seven songs that I composed and sang during a two-day meeting organized by the Poor of the Mountain (*Garīb Dohgarī Saṅghaṭnā*) for forty-five deserted women in March 1997 on the occasion of International Women's Day celebrations.

To facilitate the self-reflection of the group and create an atmosphere congenial to sharing personal life stories, we envisaged of composing distichs meant to link up the words, speech and tunes of yesteryears with the present expressions and experiences of the participants. The latter are women who, without fault on their part, have been rejected by their husband or in-laws for selfish purposes. Though the particular condition of their elders was not one of desertion as is theirs today,

both have a lot in common to share. Nevertheless, my report is not meant to underscore that commonality as such. I want to draw the attention towards the potentialities of the tradition of grindmill songs as an as-set of communication (an input medium) in the particular context of a collective self-introspection exercise undertaken by a group of deserted women from Pune district (mainly Shirur *taluka*) in Maharashtra. The idiomatic continuity is strikingly effective.

## In the Words of an Immemorial Tradition

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The twenty-seven distichs comprise 325 words or so. Among those, three occur most often (in direct form and otherwise) to denounce a reprehensible male behaviour. The first one is *pāpī*, sinner, occurring in nine songs. The word had been extensively used in the tradition of songs with the meaning of sexual aggression perceived as a social stigma of which the victim will bear the dishonour and severe consequences. The songs presently composed in March 1997 proclaim the women's innocence and point to the misdeeds of the actual miscreants. Their connotations extend to various sorts of sexual abuses and injustices meted out to innocent women. They are meant to clearly denounce, rebel against and call for retaliation in words and further on in practice. This is what deserted women can and should nowadays do without fear. They should realize that there is a sort of 'plot hatched by sinners with a treacherous mind against them noble women born from the womb of their mother and father' of good repute. The cow is used here, today as yesterday, as the emblem of a woman on account of her simplicity, innocence and unselfish nature, qualities that make her an easy prey to selfish interests of males:

Oh! you sinful man! you committed a lot of sins  
In the deep forest how did you ill-treat the cow?

On the riverside, a black cow is grazing  
Eh! you sinner, you have no pity for her.

Oh! you sinner, a villain, your sin is as heavy as the earth  
How many girls who did nothing wrong have you killed?

The following song refers to the husband who rejects his wife after marriage as if he had never been married and takes another woman. The song warns him and suggests a course of action to the potential victim:

Oh! you sinner, a villain, I'll remember your sin  
I keep on record in my memory the date of wedding.

The next examples threaten with two sorts of firm counter-actions:

You have filled up seven jars with sins  
In one day, I'll hold them all upside-down.  
Oh! you sinner! a villain, with whom are you playing fool?  
I am not a gentle woman, I'll hang you at the village wall.

The second word *cāṇḍāl*, villain, was also extensively used with the same connotations that it had in the tradition of songs. It occurs in six songs, including three of those quoted earlier. It means vile, depraved, debased, perverted, corrupted, and so on, with reference to sexual abuse and aggression. It could be rendered by the word 'debauchee'. The expression *in the gardener's garden*, very common in the oral tradition, is a cliché that usually sets up an erotic semantic environment, a place of enjoyment, green and cool. In contrast to this is the calumnious gossiping and slander, moral and physical hardships, and eventually murder:

In the gardener's garden, this is not a flower but a colocynth  
A man kills for dowry, this is not a man but a villain.

Mother and father say: 'My sweet pretty daughter  
Who is the villain who plays with your destiny?'

The noble woman came to existence in the womb of her mother  
and father

The villain has gossiped against her without her committing any  
fault.

The third word of a wide occurrence is *kapaṭī*, deceitful, treacherous. It occurs in six songs. Men are unfaithful, deceptive, unreliable; society lets them loose at the cost of women: 'Do hatch your stratagems, we shall bear the grief of your treachery,' quips a song sarcastically.

Woman, the deceitful fellow, what tricks he used  
How did he not show pity for a woman's life?

In your consideration woman's existence is like vegetable  
Eh! deceitful man, your existence, who gave it to you?

Today women face off and men look down with shame. Those who  
'have hatched so many tricks' and made women 'bearing the brunt of  
their stratagems' are frightened:

You, treacherous men! your mind is prejudiced  
A woman's name pushed in the forefront  
makes your blood run cold.

Four other qualifications apply to men's behaviour. The word *cāṇḍāl*, fickle, inconstant in loyalty, occurs in two songs that focus in this respect on the sight of men who look around for girls and make eyes at them. They 'play games with their eyes', their 'mind is burnt caught in the glance of girls'. A song warns them 'not to wander off at the sight of young girls'.

*Anyāya*, injustice, unfairness, occurs in two songs with regard to the injustice done to straightforward women by men. A first song expresses the grief of helpless parents whose daughter's life is unfairly damaged and spoilt:

Mother and father say: 'My daughter is a jewel'  
But her life a sad story with no unfairness on her part.

The second song compares a righteous woman to the acacia tree stripped from its bark at the image of women whose life is manhandled:

An acacia on the way, the passers-by prune it  
A woman with no injustice, they burn her alive.

The third characteristic feature is men's use of women for the perpetuation of their supremacy. A woman may be addressed as a Lakṣmī, but this is not in consideration of her personality. A song places sarcastic warnings in the mouth of the husband to that effect: that marriage is only meant for maintaining one's lineage; which is to say, obtain a son:

I call you Lakṣmī for the sake of marriage only  
When will the lamp of the lineage be in your womb?

As a consequence, a woman can only feel frustrated by a male partner acting important and concerned only with power when she expects consideration and affection in return for her love and is to get none:

A man says: 'The king of this territory, it's me!'  
How much affection though I feel for you,  
your distinction is opposite.

In the same perspective, parents know when they hand over their daughter in marriage that they can give her no assurance of happiness whatsoever:

Father says: 'My daughter, I gave you and go back, woman  
Your existence, me, I am not to act as guarantor for it.'

The fourth male attribute is violence. Four songs explicitly denounce male aggression as harmful. Unwilling to protect his sister who already has to bear with a co-wife, a brother hands both of them over and gets rid of them. Compared to a useless stem of millet that can not carry ears, his insensitivity turns him into a murderer. The sister in the song equates him to a butcher who wrecks women's lives.

On the riverside, this is no millet but sterile stocks  
Brother gives sister and co-wife, this is no brother but a butcher.

A second song refers to the life of Krishna whose maternal uncle Kamsa was the mythical king of Mathura. Following a prophecy that one of the sons of Devaki, his sister, will kill him, Kamsa tries to kill all her sons lest one of them should make the prophecy come true. The maternal uncle, māmā, usually playing the role of a protector of his sister and sister's children, in particular the weakest ones, like a niece, plays a key role especially in the decision and celebration of their marriage. In the song this male privilege proves fatal and murderous as in the case of the child Krishna, Devaki's son, whom Kamsa tries to kill:

In the gardener's garden, foenugreek grass is in bloom  
No hope for the niece, this is no māmā but Kamsa.

A third song refers to hidden violent plot. A man knows how to hide his weapons and motives within and cunningly attack at the proper moment, just as a lurking serpent leaps at his prey:

The man's race is not a simple, straight one  
It's a real black cobra with feet in the belly.

A fourth song resorts to similes that peasant women have been conversant with for generations:

Oh! woman, do not say 'My man is simple, ingenuous'  
His race is not a naive breed, he cuts a throat with hair.

Our detailed analysis of a re-activated performance of grindmill songs prompts us to underscore five distinctive aspects specific to that process of re-activation of a traditional form of communication. The effectiveness of the communication process rests upon the strength of words. None of them is casual. The syntax, on the other hand, may remain the simplest and shortest possible, conspicuous by its irrelevance as a determinant linguistic asset. The elementary poetic elements such as rhyme, rhythm and caesura enhance the phonetic value of the words and stress their semantic effect.

Words are powerful on account of two characteristics: genuine simplicity and symbolic import. All of them are common words borrowed from the everyday lexicon of the common person. They always refer to concrete realities. There is not a single abstract or ideological word as one may find in the usual militant songs of any action group. The latter's aim is didactic and makes a great use of key concepts. The main objective of our songs is neither didactic nor informative. A symbolic logic defines their cognitive regime. They use neither concepts nor allegories, but go by feminine common sense. Their reference is only woman's experience as spontaneously perceived and judged.

The oral text is to be sung. The musical performance can not be dissociated from the text. The traditional images, words and representations are updated and related to present practices. Two features define this referential shift. There is a semantic affinity or homology between the traditional term and present experience. The past mirrors the present; basic experience is the same. As a consequence, the shift towards a present referent is but natural, spontaneous and genuine.

Traditional idioms link up without discontinuity to the present. Tradition stands as a milieu of knowledge and a system of communication. This explains for its efficiency to transform the present.

Last but not least, a critical inflection gives bite to traditional idioms that certainly lamented about ill-treatment and harassment, but lacked punch to fight back and clearly claim another justice. The present empowers the past idioms. Critical awareness instils a new breath into them. They enjoy a new span of life. The past mirrors the present, the present makes the mirror forcefully implode.

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## Part 3

CONTOURS OF

CREATIVITY

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# INTRODUCTION

EDITORS

Three sets of opposite concepts modulate the testimonies and studies presented in this part: 'tradition' versus 'modernity', 'medium' versus 'use' and 'form' versus 'process'. They will help us to articulate elements of a conceptual framework adequate to meet the central query that we wish to clarify, namely, the contours of creativity with regard to cultural forms of symbolic communication in the context of conditions and constraints particular to various environments. These three sets are analogous by their origin and function to other misleading dichotomies that we eschewed in the previous contributions of this book.

Tradition and modernity are opposed and mutually exclusive for reasons that vary according those who propound them in order to give grounds to vested interests. Their dichotomy is analogous to that of the 'popular against the 'other', deconstructed in the seminal essay of Guy Poitevin (see Chapter 1 of this volume). The 'elite' or the 'dominant' discriminates one upon the other to ideologically legitimate a claim to excellence, to actually maintain a status of superiority through denial of contact and interaction. Non-communication gives a guarantee of secure ascendancy. Cultural distance measures social superiority and authorizes control and repression.

The second set of opposites, 'medium' versus 'use', takes for granted that the media mastermind mentalities as much as stereotyped cultural forms designed by the dominant just imprint their exact patterns in the minds. 'The medium is the message' actually proved a short-lived slogan. Fast-growing modern technologies pretentiously claimed to hold total sway over people's minds. Their claim may obviously hold good, but to the extent only of their 'consumers' remaining passively gullible. Are they ever, though ambiguously, 'active users'? The growth

of technologies of communication, no less than a better knowledge of one's heritage of symbolic forms, has as such motivated individuals and communities to use them for self-expression and social intervention. A will to own and appropriate only signals a responsible 'user' and a citizen (Vitalis 1996).

The successful control of the medium, whether traditional or modern, is proportional to the mental weakness of its clientèle. Means of mass communication may tend to turn culture into a package for consumption and destroy local, native practices. The fault is not with the means, but those who 'consume' instead of reappropriating. Similarly, the potential of traditional forms of communication may remain untapped due to a comparable impotency or unwillingness. The modern hold of dominant systems of production and circulation of cultural goods is far from having succeeded in erasing all 'indigenous' forms, which remain available to communicators if they really wish to make use of them. Both the accounts of Hema Rairkar and Paul Biot in this section on street theatre and action theatre respectively bring home the point that cultural creativity is a matter of a social agent being capable of using and determined to use available forms, irrespective of their being labelled by others as 'new' or 'modern'. Similarly, the account of Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay shows that his novelist owes his impact to a capacity to use Gandhian social signifiers prompted by a will of 'resisting colonial modernity', that is, of substituting 'alternative' or 'counter-cultural' forms to the 'dominant' and 'stereotyped' ones, to talk in the terms of the seminal essay of Vibodh Parthasarathi on interventionist tendencies. In both cases the medium is turned into a utility out of the will of committed users to effectuate a symbolic reconstruction of their contemporary society. Such was already the case with the accounts of Tara Ubhe and Kusum Sonavne in reactivating a traditional performance capacity, namely, using grindmill songs as means of cultural action within a totally different historical and social settings. What matters is not the hold of the medium, but the sway of the social actor over the medium. Any discourse complacently and unilaterally focusing only on the medium, whatever the validity of its aesthetic, semantic or technical arguments, shall henceforth be suspect of complicity with dominant and repressive orders.

The third set of opposites, 'form' versus 'process', is actually implied in the two first sets. It is analogous to the dichotomy of 'text' and 'context' previously discarded in the chapter by Karine Bates on

the history of the Indian legal system and practices, which are shown in their diversity at different points of time as constantly subject to processes of transformation. It was further illustrated by the study by Guy Poitevin of Vaâr narratives that turn the figure of the donkey into an asset of self-identification. Cultural forms are the result of compromises and negotiation between contending forces vying for—or attempting to controvert—control and governance of the social fabric.

In this regard, our studies will not be expected to focus on ‘textuality’, and debate about the superiority of one form over another—for instance, traditional (folk forms) over modern (electronic and information media), dramatic (dance, theatre) over visual (film, slides, video, images), speech (storytelling, lecturing) over print (reading, posters), song over speech, personal face-to-face over collective meeting (group discussion), direct and personalized interaction over mass display of instrumental media, etc. They will not remain too concerned with the potential and limitations of each form and means. The focus eventually will be on the social agent and the process that he/she tries to unleash, on his/her capacity, skill and means to reinvent from within the available symbolic material, on the suitability of forms and means to intended aims, on the degree of autonomy left to the artist as social actor, as the case is strongly made in particular by P.J. Amala Dos in ‘Folk Arts and Folk Artists’. In short, he dwells on the impact of a process over a context, and a performance over an environment. In this regard, the following essays remind us of a dimension structurally specific to folk art, and a secret of its efficacy, namely, its ‘multimedia’ dimension. A combination of forms and media is possibly most effective in facilitating processes of artistic as well as social creativity. An innovative communication is ‘multiform’.

## Scenarios of Stress

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P.J. Amala Dos is a folk performer in Tamil Nadu. In his chapter ‘Folk Arts and Folk Artists: Myths and Realities’, he champions the genuineness of folk culture, claiming that it cannot fit into the rigid and constricting models as theorized by scholars: ‘The folk form takes its shape on the basis of the lifestyle, environment, strength and weakness, nature of work, the problems and pleasure, struggles and success of the people.’

A major challenge creative artists are faced with is to infuse progressive content into communicative art forms. The characters found in these forms represent certain collective values that may be selected and worked out in order to reflect contemporary issues. However, whenever this reconstruction and reappropriation is undertaken by an educated elite—such as the graduates of folklore departments in universities—it often takes a narrow perspective because of insufficient insights into the cultural, economic, social and political situation of the folk artists and their folk forms. This is detrimental to the issues at stake because of the political influence this educated elite exerts on media facilitators, and state and central government. As a result, funds and attention are diverted from real artists to the researchers and influential people. Folk artists eventually become bonded labour at the disposal of agents who decide their programmes and give them a small share of the money they would have received (for these specific programmes) from public and private sponsors.

Folk artists are faced with the same kind of ostracism when trying to deal with TV and radio: access to the mass media is restricted to formally educated persons speaking and acting in the name of the ‘people’. The situation is similar with their partners in NGOs who may learn a few basics of the art form and then take the right to perform it in place of their informants.

The author comes up with an optimistic statement that this cultural co-optation and exploitation of folk artists will not prevent rural folk from existing. ‘If rural people are healthy, only then will the folk forms be healthy.’ He concludes saying that that the efforts of individuals and institutions should converge on raising literacy standards and economical status of genuine folk artists, instead of binding them to an exploitative system.

## Scenarios of Appropriation

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In reaction to a sterile and monolithic vision of Western contemporary art forms as the unique path to creativity, a few artists have advocated a new quest for ‘diversity’ in the performing arts by promoting inter-cultural processes that would not be based on the exploitation of ‘subaltern’ cultural products and performers:

We need radical changes in the way we look at non-western performing arts. Evidently 'traditional' forms should be preserved from western cultural and commercial domination, although preservation itself is not the ultimate step: multicultural performances in the West might quickly turn into a sort of circus exhibition in which specimens of 'authentic traditional' art forms are displayed to admiring (or bored) audiences .... This new vision will grow up by promoting intercultural experiments in which creative artists and scholars from many parts of the world deal with the human cultural heritage as multiple 'sources of knowledge' having their own relevance to contemporary art production. (Bel 1993: 70)

This process of inter-cultural exchange may only take place in a non-conflictual and non-hierarchic environment—international festivals, workshops, schools, etc.—and it requires an important investment of artists and their mentors. It may be seen as a voluntary attitude of the Western elite in contrast with the spontaneous and market-submissive phenomenon of world music, dance and so on.

The appropriation of an art form implies a different dynamics that is more intricately woven on the social–economical fabric of a particular period of time. Examples of this process will be discussed in this section.

The first example is taken from the last decades of colonial India. Modernity in Europe may have conveyed the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. However, in the colonies it merely 'helped in undermining the physical and moral sovereignty of the subject peoples', as it conveyed the idea of a material and moral superiority of the European civilization contrasting with the backwardness and morally degraded state of populations under the colonial yoke. Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay's essay, 'Resisting Colonial Modernity: Premchand's *Rangabhoomi*', is an illustration of the way an Indian intelligentsia influenced by Gandhi resisted this Western ideology of modernism.

Gandhi's unconditional commitment to non-violence reversed the oppressor's viewpoint by claiming the moral superiority of Indian culture and civilization. However, Gandhians have been aware that the traditional social order in India is not egalitarian. For this reason they reconstructed the ideal of a consensual 'village' in which class and caste disparities could be taken care of to the advantage of all concerned

(Jodhka 2002). '[I]n its fight against modernity, the tradition was also transformed and the nation and its leadership were redefined' (Jodhka 2002). Rangabhoomi, the village depicted by Premchand, is one of the ideal type. The main character of the story is himself a Dalit, here taken as the representative of a reformed Hinduism, free of cast discrimination and dominance, opposed to Christianity, the oppressor's belief.

In this political novel the cultural resistance to Western domination is, therefore, basically a religious one. The Dalit, a blind beggar, inherits a piece of land that he wants to use for the benefit of pilgrims. An Indian Christian wants to use the land to build a cigarette factory. Thus, the cultural-religious struggle is depicted as an economical and social issue, which serves as a support to a broader criticism of industrialism. However, moral arguments prevail over economical ones, as the fight is one of idealism against materialism, moral order against profit making, community against individualism. Premchand insisted on ethical rather than political-economical values in an attempt to revive the spirit of Indian nationalists after the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhi.

The author argues that Premchand was little aware of the fact that 'the conception of a unitary Hinduism was a modern phenomenon developed under colonial influence, and is as much a modernist/colonial construct as the justification for industrialism'. This lack of awareness of Gandhian intellectuals has paved the way to the development of Hindutva as a leading ideology of post-colonial India (Patel 2002: 4828).

The chapter 'Street Theatre in Maharashtra' by Hema Rairkar, is a historical record and analysis of a socio-cultural intervention on the issue of deserted women in rural Maharashtra. A study group of social animators, both men and women, first worked on 'identifying the collective attitudes, the social and cultural structures, and the system of values which prompt and motivate this generalised practice'. In the process of gathering this knowledge, the group decided that a play would be the most appropriate medium for its impact on a large audience. In other words, the choice of the form was determined by the message and the intention behind the act of communication—not the other way around. In addition, the fabrication itself was not based on a formal study of rules of the art. It took place in a self-training process

by which the actor-animators became aware of the effectiveness of words, gestures, expressive forms and situations.

The play was not an end in itself, as it prompted a reflexive social awareness of the condition of abandoned women, more dynamism in communicating and acting towards changes of attitudes, and it created opportunities for social animators to establish contacts in new villages. Its success could be attributed to a capacity to touch the audience with emotions that were recognized by the same social group it had originated from. Unlike top-down communication by urban activists prescribing their own procedures for solving social problems, it was imbedded with the genuine perceptions of actresses sharing the same fate as their spectators, thereby triggering emotional energy, motivations and ideas for social change.

A founder of the Action Theatre movement in Belgium, Paul Biot asserts that 'popular culture does not exist ... because culture without people is not culture but aesthetic products and expediency, matters carried by communication systems or goods enforced by education'. His assertion comes in support to the refusal of dichotomic categorizations opposing the 'people' to the 'elite', or 'art' to 'non-art'. In his chapter, 'Action Theatre in Belgium', he further advocates that the very notion of 'art' and 'audience' in Europe emerged as culture became a form of entertainment for the dominant classes, thereby losing 'its constitutive bond with people's creation and social development'. In contrast, Action Theatre stands as the reappropriation of a collective creative process in which 'action' encompasses the 'cry for justice' at the origin of the work, its elaboration, its performance and its critical assessment involving the spectators.

This notion of 'action' implies a continuity of thinking in which the focus is on processes, rather than forms and products, of committed creative minds. 'The play is only one of the tools for action.' In fact, Action Theatre is not a specific form. The form of each play is determined by people telling 'with their [own] words and gestures, their eyes and their memory, their revolt, their hopes, their distress, their joys, how they see the world, here and now, and how they want to change it'. This approach is akin to that of 'action research' in that it binds together popular cultures and socio-cultural action. According to the author, when popular cultures are reduced to folk entertainment, socio-cultural action falls in the hands of the dominant social groups who undertake

‘socio-cultural programmes’ with no sufficient content to promote societal changes. Thus, ‘popular culture’ may be manipulated to serve alien purposes.

Paul Biot warns us against the perpetual process of recuperation of popular cultures by dominant forces—both political and cultural. Action Theatre itself does not evade this process. Groups, therefore, need to be cautious and self-critical as to the continuity and clarity of their social and artistic commitment. Actors need to remain aware of messages sent by the spectators, and they should not run into the self-deception of accepting new techniques for the sake of technique. ‘The stage is a reproduction of the way the group looks at society.’

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**3.1**

***Scenarios***

***of***

***Stress***

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# 10

## FOLK ARTS AND FOLK ARTISTS: MYTHS AND REALITIES\*

P.J. AMALA DOS

### The Feelings of an Artist

This chapter is going to be different from all the others because most people have been presenting someone else, whereas I am talking about myself. Basically, I am a *Therukoothu* (Tamil street theatre) folk artist, and I represent folk communities. After a three-and-a-half-year study of that form, I have performed about 100 times. My presentation may not have much of an academic value. It is a presentation of an artist—of the feelings of an artist—and a source information for my audience. My association with the folk artists, as a folk artist myself and as president of the Folk Artists' Federation of Tamil Nadu, has helped me understand better my fellow artists and their art forms. I want to register my feelings here. As a human being and folk artist, we have been destroyed and neglected by the so-called technological media.

\* This paper is a transcription of the author's oral intervention in the international seminar *Communication Processes and Social Transformation*, Pune, 8–13 January 1996. This seminar was organized by the *Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences* (CCRSS) with the support of the *Charles-Léopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humankind* (FPH).

As a Therokoothu artist, I went to villages to find out how many folk forms are known today in Tamil Nadu. About 122 folk forms still exist, and are very much alive, and there are more than 200,000 folk artists who practise these. With all my credits, I was supported by the government to go around the whole of Tamil Nadu to study the possibilities of promoting the folk forms and the folk artists. Taking advantage of this, I travelled all over the state. In 1989 I set up the Federation of Tamil Nadu Folk Artists, covering the whole state, and the following year organized the State Conference of Folk Artists in Chennai. It was the first of its kind in the country. A second one took place in 1996 at the same venue. Seven thousand folk artists participated with costumes, banners, beating of drums, singing, playing and dancing. In spite of heavy rains, they participated enthusiastically and registered our demands to the ministry. Unfortunately, though, the minister for culture and education asked us to go and learn the grammar of folk forms from educated people. It was a terrible shock, and we all protested. This led to a demonstration against the government.

## Folk Forms and Their Utility

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The strength of the folk form is that it has no rigid grammar. It can accommodate anything. It becomes the people's form. Literally, 'folk' means 'people' and thus 'folk form' means 'people's form'. When they want, they can change the forms and the content, but it continues to be their form. No individual has ever been or is the owner of any folk form. It is a collective and community form. The folk form takes its shape on the basis of the lifestyle, environment, strength and weakness, nature of work, problems and pleasure, struggles and success of the people. Hence, there cannot be any rigid grammar for any particular folk form. This is the strength of the folk form. The text and shape can be changed as and when the owners of the form, the rural folk, feel the necessity for it.

Originally, the folk forms were gestures—that is, visual. They were slowly clubbed with words, as audio-visual forms came into existence. At a later stage some of these popular forms were brought into the rigid frame of religious texts by the Aryans and the Bhakti movements. There are many folk forms that still enjoy a complete freedom and unpolluted

atmosphere, like grandma's stories, proverbs, lullabies, grindmill songs, and in Tamil Nadu rice-pounding songs, tape songs, *Kolai Sindhu*, *Oppaari* (death song), *Kummi* (songs accompanying *Kummi* which is a form of folk dance in Tamil Nadu and Kerala), *kolaattam* (a dance form from Andhra Pradesh involving the use of sticks), *Kuruwan*, *kurathi* songs, tattoo songs, etc. These folk forms are alive in the state, and they are also known as non-paying folk forms, that is, we do not get any remuneration through these forms. They are just spontaneous expression. They suffer from a lack of recognition and exploitation by the educated and, of course, elite media facilitators. But this does not mean that they have lost the function that they performed for generations of acting as vehicles of social values and religious faith. If these forms are properly used to help rural people understand the reasons for the existing oppressive socio-economic and political systems, they may pave the way for a better life.

Folk forms that are remunerative can be divided into two kinds, communicating and non-communicating (only recreational). Most of the communicative art forms are strictly religious, and they have depended on religious functions and temple festivals for their survival. Though most of the stories are taken from religious texts and mythology, the possibility of infusing progressive content into them is not a formidable task. These folk forms have an in-built potential to become a means of furthering the people's form. The progressive elements in these folk forms do not end there. It is possible to create new stories, and incorporate new issues. Some experiments have been made in this regard with a fair amount of success. But one has to remember here an important point. That folk artists involved in these experiments should have proper conviction about the issues that they are taking up. Otherwise these experiments cannot succeed.

Interestingly, most of these folk forms have an in-built character like *sutradhari*, *vidhushak* or comedian who narrates the story but does not stop at that. He or she is also the representative of the audience, and as such echoes both the immediate mundane thoughts of the spectators and their deep longing for social justice. He or she takes the audience into the past, and projects a future through an interpretation of mythological characters. This aspect is useful to link up the values projected in the play in the contemporary social,

economic and political context. Thus, this character found in such folk forms has the potential to rise to the occasion, and can certainly be considered a major progressive element. But it does not end there. These characters are not individuals; they represent certain values and personify them. Therefore, it is possible to create new folk stories on contemporary issues. Contemporary evils like corruption, illiteracy and lack of awareness can be depicted as *asuras* (demons), and an effective folk story can be written. Hence, the folk form can allegorically warn that if the majority of the people are unscientific, the nation is unscientific; if the majority of the people are illiterate, the nation is illiterate, and so on.

In the beginning there was no manuscript for the text of folk forms. It was passed on from generation to generation orally, and even today, in spite of the spread of the print media, many folk artists consider the oral message as the text. This is very much true even in the case of folk artists belonging to well-established folk forms like *Therukoothu* (street theatre performed in Tamil Nadu), leather puppetry, *Veedhi natakam* (street theatre peculiar to Andhra Pradesh), *Yakshagana* (literally song of the *Yaksha*; traditional dance drama popular in Karnataka), *Bayalaata* (a form of *Yakshagana*), *thaiyam*, *burakatha* (a form of storytelling popular in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh), *oku katha*, etc.

The aforementioned spontaneous folk forms do not require a trained individual to play the role of an artist; all of the rural people can play that role very effectively. In this case, the literacy standards, economic status, social relationships, faith concepts, caste rigidity, etc. represented in the folk forms become the basis upon which people can reflect over their condition. Thus, these folk forms are a resource of the nation's value and culture.

When we talk about the influence of the folk forms, we mean the influence of the people over the people, because, as I mentioned, they are the people's forms. If the people who are the masters of folk forms are not sufficiently fed with information, there cannot be any scientific influence over the population at large. Folk artists must be convinced about the need for utilizing the medium to create awareness among people.

## Folk Forms, NGOs and Researchers

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In this section I touch upon what happens with so-called scholars and researchers in the folk arts. Apart from the International Tamil Research Institute at Chennai, folklore departments for research have been started since the late 1980s in various universities, especially in Kamaraj University, Pondicherry University, Madras University and Tanjore Tamil University. However, the result today is that a few individuals took folk forms in their hands and interpreted it with not much of understanding. I strongly believe that the role of the researcher should be looked into seriously and ascertained that their study is not only to fulfil the expectations of their guides to get a doctoral degree. Of course, when I say this I only refer to my state, the universities where I am working. In the process of their study, some researchers have picked up some tunes and movements, and by giving some public programmes at higher rate (because they are educated) can proclaim themselves as champions of the promotion and preservation of folk forms. Sometimes because of their capacity to improvise they claim that they are the owners of particular folk forms. Actually their interpretation of folk forms are like a blind man explaining the shape of an elephant. They often fail to make an in-depth study of the cultural, economic, social and political situation of the folk artists and their forms.

Because of their academic qualification and of their political influence, they have also been able to influence the state and central governments to get funds allotted to developing folk forms and folk arts. But they have used them for their own development. The consequence of this is that the state and central academies (the Sangeet Natak Academy has got its own academy in each state and the Natakan Mandran in Tamil Nadu, funded by central and state governments) that are meant to develop folk art and folk artists focused on researchers and influential people instead and forgot the real artists. This results in folk artists experiencing various forms of exploitation from different corners.

Basically, this is because we, folk artists, do not have sufficient economic backing. But any individual can become an agent. Take *villupattu* (leather puppetry), *therukoothu* (street theatre in Tamil Nadu) or various well-established forms, for which there will be a headman who is supposed to be an agent. He is not an artist, but by

virtue of the money that he has, he gives us some advance, anything from Rs 5,000 to 10,000 for the whole of the year, according to the roles that we play in folk art forms. Basically, he gets us as bonded labour and we work under him. We do not know even how much money he gets paid. Suppose he gets Rs 10,000 for a programme, he then hardly gives a few thousand rupees to the artists. We do not benefit from it, since we have already taken an advance from him. If we ask him for it, we will be beaten up by *goondas* (thugs). We basically experience exploitation at the hands of agents.

If artists approach television and radio, the government's 'popular media', they face a similar problem. The culture of commission and the rigid rules of the central and state government media do not allow us programmes easily. The Federation, many groups and I myself have registered protests challenging TV authorities and the quality of TV folk forms. They just employ people with no relation whatsoever with the folk arts, resulting in very awkward programming. The state does not take care of the real folk artists, or even contact us, and prefer to cater only to the elite.

NGOs, by virtue of the academic qualifications of the workers, finance and other means, learn some of the tunes and body movements of the folk forms, and take upon the right to act as folk artists. This is just exploitative, as they are able to perform for the government and various educational institutions instead of the real artists. That said, there are genuine researchers and we do have respect for them.

In Tamil Nadu there is a well-known and notorious artist called Vijay Lakshmi. She is given Rs 33,000 for one show. For the same programme, which will last a number of hours, we are given a mere Rs 3,000. Moreover, we have to lobby hard for being given the chance of performing and earning a commission. This is exploitation as well.

There is also exploitation by consumers. Let us take very popular forms like *karakattam* (girls' dance), leather puppetry or other popular song forms, and there are many of them, in which women take part. If in my troupe I have young attractive girls, then I am more likely to be given a programme.

In this context, instead of taking upon themselves the role of the artists, the role of the NGOs in using folk media has to be limited as providers of information to folk artists and as facilitators to help them use the given information to make folk forms that can create awareness

among rural people. The NGOs stepping into the role of folk artists should be discouraged and even forbidden because they can never take their place, moving to an alien culture with regard to literacy standards, economic status, social relationships, etc.

As long as rural folk exist, folk forms cannot be erased from this land. As long as the village people are there, the folk forms will be there. The structure and text may change according to the changing rural situation, but the folk forms will never vanish. If rural people are healthy, only then will folk forms remain healthy.

Efforts are also needed by organizations, institutions, individuals and researchers to raise the literacy standard, economic status, social relations, employment opportunities and health of folk artists. I may be able to continue my work, by not only organizing the folk artists, but helping them raise their standard of living, and this becomes possible only with the help of Madhyam<sup>1</sup> because it feeds me as an artist and helps me as in my needs. It is how we help each other. And again, Madhyam listens to us and is helping us to have an in-depth survey covering all the aspects of the lives of folk artists in Tamil Nadu.

## Note

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1. Madhyam (<http://www.madhyam.in>) is a Bangalore-based NGO supporting folk arts and Amala Dos' work in particular.



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## **3.2**

***Scenarios***

***of***

***Appropriation***

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## RESISTING COLONIAL MODERNITY: PREMCHAND'S *RANGABHOOMI*

SHASHI BHUSHAN UPADHYAY

This chapter endeavours to explore the language of resistance deployed by Premchand—one of the most important writers in the Hindi–Urdu stream of literature—in opposition to colonial modernity. *Rangabhoomi* (The Stage), a major novel by Premchand, written in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement, serves as a crucial text to elucidate the significant points of this opposition. It was written between October 1922 and April 1924 and was published in February 1925 (Goenka 1981: 44–45). It was hailed as a major achievement, earned Premchand the epithet of *Upanyas Samrat* (Emperor of the Novel) and sold many more copies than any of his earlier novels. It is the largest novel by Premchand and is regarded as his second best (after *Godan* [The Gift of Cow]) by critics. It is with relation to this text that the issues relating to the notions of modernity and tradition as they operated in colonial Indian context will be examined. These issues will also be considered with reference to Premchand's journalistic writings.

Western modernism, with many of its attributes, arrived in India in the wake of colonialism. It went through several phases. From the benevolent and admiring Orientalism of the early days, it soon developed into the uncompromising Utilitarianism of the nineteenth century, further flowering into social Darwinism and racism of the late nineteenth century (see Metcalfe 1998; Stokes 1959). In many

instances, it served to denote the material and moral superiority of the West and, consequently, the justification for colonial rule over the supposedly morally degraded and materially deprived subject people. It was selectively employed in an effort to conquer the minds of the colonial subjects and to constantly remind them about their comprehensive inferiority (ranging from intellectual to physical) in comparison to the hugely successful European civilizations.

In the nineteenth century, colonial intellectuals also imbibed these ideas and occasionally supported by the colonial rulers launched various projects of reform aimed at the improvement of the traditional social order. But modernity remained a problematic notion in the colonial territory. In Europe, in its fight against the medieval inegalitarian, superstitious and hierarchical society, it spawned the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. On the other hand, as a vehicle and tool for colonialism, it helped in undermining the physical and moral sovereignty of the subject people in the colonies. Its implementation in the colonial territories remained arbitrary and selective. Early Indian nationalists, therefore, accused the colonial regime for not doing enough to enforce modern ideas and institutions, and for failing to implement the project of modernity. Even those, such as Tilak in Maharashtra, and Bankim and some *Swadeshi* enthusiasts in Bengal, who were opposed to social reform measures, were basically against the intervention by colonial rulers in the social arena, and not against the project of modernity as such.

The arrival of Gandhi on the nationalist scene, however, signified certain paradigmatic shifts. Gandhi, under whose leadership the mass-oriented phase of the national movement was initiated, was fundamentally opposed to the modernist vision. About a decade before, in 1909, he had already attempted a comprehensive critique of the modern Western civilization in his book *Hind Swaraj*. Throughout most of his life he remained a bitter critic of modern institutions and lifestyles (Chatterjee 1986: 85–128).

Premchand, like many among the Indian intelligentsia, was much influenced by Gandhi. The latter's insistence on non-violence and his criticism of the West, simultaneously implying the moral superiority of the Eastern culture and civilization, particularly appealed to him (for Gandhi's views on modern civilization, see Gandhi 1997). In these, Premchand visualized the nodal points from which the resistance to

colonialism could be mounted. Tradition, therefore, became the important point of reference and a tool to fight the alien regime. However, Premchand, like Gandhi, was aware that the traditional social order in India was inequalitarian and oppressive, particularly for those belonging to the Dalit (or untouchable) castes. He, therefore, created in *Rangabhoomi*, a non-hierarchical and relatively homogeneous village community, as a source of resistance to industrialism and ultimately to colonialism. And this resistance was led, sometimes single-handedly, by the hero who belonged to a Dalit caste. Therefore, in its fight against modernity, tradition was also transformed, and the nation and its leadership were redefined.

The theme of *Rangabhoomi* is driven by the anti-imperialist imperative and by the attempt to encourage nationalists not to despair at a time of political withdrawal and inactivity. The resistance visualized is at two levels—cultural and political. The cultural resistance is against industrialism and Christianity, while the political one is against the colonial regime. While the first is explicitly stated, the second is symbolically represented. The cultural resistance takes precedence over the political, and, in certain senses, itself acquires a political character. Industrialism and Christianity are considered the twin aspects of the colonial cultural onslaught and the battle against them is waged by the two central characters. One is a Dalit (Surdas) and the other a woman (Sophia) born in a Christian family and both traditionally outside the boundaries of the mainstream Hindu social order. While Surdas' character is based on Gandhi, Sophia's character, by author's confession, is inspired by Annie Besant. The choices are significant because they strengthen the cultural locales from where the resistance to colonial cultural offshoots is launched. It is an imagined liberal and reformed Hinduism without discrimination and hierarchy which serves as the centre of this cultural opposition. Surdas, in his quest for defending the traditional community, and Sophia, in her belief in a tolerant, value-based Hinduism, provide resistance points to colonial cultural hegemony. They respectively defend the village community and Hinduism against the assault of modern industry and narrow-minded Christianity.

*Rangabhoomi*, by author's own confession, is a political novel. Its story moves along twin axes, both equally important and intertwined in political terms. One is located in Pandeypur, a small semi-rural

settlement, whose residents are generally poor and deprived. The other revolves around three—two aristocratic and one industrialist—families based in the city of Banaras. Thematically, the story of the Pandeypur centres on the resistance of its inhabitants, particularly Surdas, against the establishment of a cigarette factory in its vicinity. The other story, mostly symbolically, takes up the theme of the nationalist struggle against colonialism. It is also concerned with Sophia's anguish against her family's religious faith and her preference for Hinduism. There is a debate among Hindi critics whether the central concern of the novel is economic or political, whether its main focus is on the struggle against industrialism or against colonialism. In fact, there seems to be no contradiction between these two and both are related and are essentially political. As we will see, in Premchand's view, the struggle against colonialism and capitalist civilization is closely related to the nationalist resistance to political subordination; both are part of the same struggle of national resistance. But, as will be clear in the subsequent discussion, another fundamental thrust of this resistance is cultural in nature. It is another matter that Premchand tends to subsume this cultural opposition also in the broader political strategy.

John Sevak, an Indian Christian, wants to establish a cigarette factory in the vicinity of village Pandeypur on the land inherited by Surdas, a blind beggar of a Dalit caste. The latter refuses to part with his hereditary land and has other plans for it. Surdas is not only against the factory, which, according to him, would corrupt the people of the village and pose a moral and physical danger to them; he also wants to build a *dharmshala* (literally, 'house of faith', but actually a building used for temporary sojourn for pilgrims) and a well on it for the benefit of pilgrims. For this purpose he has saved a substantial amount of Rs 500 from the alms he has collected over the years. John Sevak is determined to construct the factory there, while Surdas is equally adamant not to give away his land. The battle, therefore, is joined right from the first scene in the novel. On the one hand, there is a middle-class capitalist having links with the aristocrats and with access to the colonial administration. On the other hand, there is a poor, blind beggar who is practically alone in the battle as the villagers are vacillating and divided. Although some of the villagers think that Surdas' land benefits the community by serving as a grazing ground for the cattle and camping place for pilgrims and the plague victims, others feel that the establishment of the factory would profit them

as some of them can get jobs there, while others could hawk their goods to an increasing number of future factory workers. While the villagers initially view this phenomenon in material terms to decide if they are for or against it, Surdas' opposition is basically on moral grounds.

The Christian family to which John Sevak belongs had converted two generations ago. John's father, Ishwar Sevak, remembers that as a child he used to accompany his mother for holy dips into the Ganges. Now the family is internally divided in political and cultural sympathies. The patriarch, Ishwar Sevak, is shown to be devoted to his religion, but is also caricatured for his miserliness. John Sevak appears involved in religion only for form's sake; his main religion is stated to be money and profit, and he is a capitalist to the core. He, on the one hand, lobbies with the colonial administration, while, on the other, he professes to be a Swadeshi enthusiast who wants to set up industries to stop the flow of funds to Britain. John's wife, who has been identified in the novel only as Mrs. Sevak, is portrayed as a nasty and narrow-minded woman who seeks identification with the rulers and considers the Indians inferior. Their daughter, Sophia, is outspoken about her Indian roots and, much to the chagrin of her mother, is inclined towards Hinduism and Buddhism, and is critical of Christianity. Prabhu Sevak, the son, is almost a non-believer. Both Sophia and Prabhu have nationalist sympathies, are critical to the religious leanings of the family and are opposed to the family's links with the rulers.

Another urban family is that of the *zamindar*, Kunwar Bharat Singh, who has organized a volunteer force, led by his son, Vinay, which helps people in times of calamities. Bharat Singh tries to strike a balance between his loyalties to the British and his identity as an Indian. His wife, Jahnvi, a strict and stronger person, is more forthright and has brought up her son to devote himself totally to the national cause. Vinay is a vacillating individual, with a professed ideology of non-violence. He is devoted to his mother and is committed to serving the nation. Indu, the daughter, is married to another big *zamindar*, Raja Mahendra Kumar, who is also chairman of the city's municipality.

The volunteer force led by Vinay, avowedly working to help the people in times of natural calamities, is essentially nationalist in character. Their sentiments, songs and discussions all reveal the intentions of the author to present the members of this volunteer force as nationalist. Although their activities are not directly against

the colonial rule, it may be due to author's constraints of not annoying the authorities. At the same time, possibly inadvertently, it is also reflective of the compulsion of a *zamindar* family whose existence is largely based on the mercy of the colonial rulers.

In the village Surdas wages a determined struggle against the acquisition of his land. John Sevak solicits the support of Mahendra Kumar and other authorities through various stratagems and finally succeeds in acquiring the land. Surdas, on his part, fights against it by roaming the streets of the city singing and telling the people of Banaras the tale of this injustice. Sophia, an admirer of Surdas, convinces the district magistrate Clarke, an Englishman, who is in turn interested in her, to revert this decision. Clarke's decision is construed as an insult to the Indians by Mahendra Kumar and others of the Indian ruling groups. They campaign against Clarke through the press and through representations to the higher authorities and finally succeed in getting him transferred to a princely state. They ultimately also manage to get Clarke's decision rescinded and Surdas' land is given to John Sevak who starts building his factory.

The progress of construction and the eventual operation realizes the worst fears of Surdas. His earlier statements prove to be prophetic. The outside workers start living in the village and rent houses there; the inhabitants turn greedy—some join as workers and some start keeping workers in their houses. Once the factory starts functioning, the problem of providing suitable accommodation to workers crops up. Now John Sevak decides to outright acquire the village in order to turn it into housing barracks. The initial resistance of the villagers is overcome by the alternate use of enticement and threats. Almost all the villagers, except Surdas, accept the compensation offered by the authorities. Surdas, however, stands his ground and refuses to vacate his parental abode. Now the villagers realize their mistake of succumbing to force and temptation. They rally behind Surdas in his struggle; many others from the city and the surrounding areas also come to support them. The authorities call in the military and try to forcibly take possession of the village. The crowds turn restive and Surdas tries to pacify them. He is shot in the process by the same district magistrate, Clarke, who was earlier instrumental in giving back his land and is now back from his posting in the princely state. Surdas dies a few days later, triumphant in his defeat and with a legacy of new resolve for those who are left behind.

The very first scene of the novel outlines the contours of cultural confrontation. John Sevak, an Indian Christian, aspires to become an industrialist and wants to set up a factory on the piece of land owned by Surdas. Industrialism and Christianity, both considered Western modern imports, combine in his person. In fact, his surname, Sevak (literally 'servant', but generally meant to be as a servant of the people), is also ironic because he is portrayed as its exact opposite—an exploiter. In opposition to him, stands Surdas whose fear of and opposition to the factory is as strong as Sevak's interest in it. John Sevak's materialistic and mean disposition is contrasted to Surdas' forbearance and idealism. Initially, John Sevak is reluctant to offer alms to Surdas. But when he learns that the latter owns the land he is interested in, he tries to give him Rs 5. Surdas, who had run about a mile behind the buggy of the Sevak family for alms, now refuses to accept the offering because it is, as he says, now tainted with selfishness. John Sevak tells him: 'I'll open a factory here, which will work towards the progress of the nation and the race. The poor will benefit, and thousands of people will be employed' (Premchand 1925: 11). At another place, he claims:

The salvation of our race is through development of craft and industry. This cigarette factory will solve the problems of at least a thousand people, and there'll be less pressure on agriculture.... My factory will provide the opportunity for such unemployed people to earn their bread. (ibid.: 45)

But Surdas refuses to sell his land, which is not in his personal use, even after an offer of Rs 5,000 is made. He argues that, '[T]his land benefits the villagers. There is no fodder available in the area. The cattle from nearby villages come here for grazing. If I sell, there'll be no place for them to go' (ibid.: 11).

His argument, however, does not remain limited to the economic value of the land to the community. The attachment to tradition, to a particular moral order and faith in religion are other dimensions related to his position. He believes that he would be committing a sin if he sold the land. When it is argued that the employment of so many people in the factory would be a virtuous act, he counters by saying, 'The cows from the nearby area graze there.... What's more sacred than the service to the cows?' (ibid.: 56).

The other dimensions of his opposition to the factory become evident in the course of his discussion with Mahendra Kumar who,

on the request of John Sevak, tries to persuade him to sell his land. Surdas tells him categorically, 'When this thing is not mine, how can I sell it?' This baffles Mahendra Kumar whom British colonial law has taught about individual-centric property. Surdas clarifies his stand that this land:

[...] is not mine; it belongs to my ancestors. Only that thing is mine which I have acquired by working with my own hands. This land has been entrusted to me. I'm not its owner.... My relation with this land is only such that I should protect it till I live, and leave it as such when I die.

This traditional, community-oriented position is in complete contrast to the emerging individual-oriented outlook that the colonial modernity had generated in India. In this world-view, the property and assets do not belong to individuals even though they are allowed to enjoy them. The community has a say in the matter of their disposal, because an injudicious transfer might endanger the existence of the collective. Therefore, when the argument is put forward that the factory will provide employment and bring prosperity to the village, Surdas reacts saying:

You're right, my lord, that some prosperity may come to the village and some people may earn extra income. But, while, on the one hand, prosperity will come, on the other hand, toddy and liquor will be sold on a larger scale, prostitutes will start settling here, outsiders will ogle at our women; this will be a great sin. Tempted by the prospects of earning wages, the peasants will leave their work [to join the factory]; they'll learn bad behaviour and spread it in their villages. The rural women will come here to become labourers and will be spoiled by the lure of money.... May God never bring such prosperity here.

He does not believe in the assurances that he would be able to build a temple and a *dharmshala* near the factory with the money received as compensation:

The Sahib is a Christian. He'll turn the *dharmshala* into a godown for tobacco; the labourers will sleep in the temple; they'll frequent the village well, making it difficult for the village women to fetch water. Even if Sahib doesn't do it, his offspring will do so. The name of my ancestors will be spoiled. (Premchand 1925: 73–74)

Thus, it becomes clear that Surdas' arguments against industrialism are moral, not economic. He does not say that the modern industry will destroy the crafts and small industries, which would render millions of people jobless, an argument advanced by Gandhi. In fact, Surdas argues in the opposite direction. Even if the factory provides employment, even if it brings prosperity to the village, it is undesirable because it will destroy the traditional moral fabric of the community. In effect, it will cause even more havoc; it will displace the villagers from their homes, making them rootless and prone to vices. For Surdas, as also for his creator, the demonic essence of the factory lies in its relentless expansion that will subjugate and displace people from their ancestral abodes and will tear apart the base on which centuries of traditional social and moral order rests.

The divide between the moral and the material is further reinforced by the method of Surdas' struggle. He abhors violence and considers life a sport where victory and defeat both come as a matter of course. Struggle against injustice is a moral imperative irrespective of the consequences. Therefore, winning or losing should not lead to euphoria or despair. This philosophy is reflected in his life. When he is congratulated by Sophia for winning back his land, he replies: '[T]his is not the policy of the sportsmen. They don't laugh at the losers.' He adds further saying, '[M]y job is to struggle for justice' (ibid.: 116). Later, when he finally loses his land, he refuses to despair: 'Victory and defeat are essential to life. I may win sometimes and lose at other times. Why worry about it? Earlier I won against the mighty, and today I've lost. This all happens in a game' (ibid.: 301).

His tenacity and irrepressible spirit are reflected when his house is burnt by an angry and jealous villager. Surdas' nephew, Mithua, asks him where they were going to live now:

Surdas: We'll build another home.

Mithua: And if someone burns it down again?

Surdas: We'll build yet another.

Mithua: And if that is also burnt down?

Surdas: We'll build yet another one.

Mithua: If someone burns it down a thousand times?

Surdas: Then we'll also build it a thousand times. Children have a special interest in numbers.

Mithua asks yet again: And if someone burns it down ten million times?

Surdas replies with the same childlike simplicity: Then we will also build it ten million times.

This stance should also be viewed in the backdrop of the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement, which was construed as a defeat by many. To boost the flagging enthusiasm of the nationalists, Premchand, through the medium of Surdas, seems to exhort them to take life as a continuous struggle and to exhibit a spirit befitting it. To accept the defeat as permanent would be fatal. Even if one acknowledges the reality of defeat, one should not despair, but should prepare for the next battle. Surdas, in his dying statement, expresses this sentiment:

You won and I lost.... You're an experienced player, you don't lose breath, you play as a team and you're enthusiastic. We get tired, start panting and are divided. You're a skilled player, while we're novices. But this is the only difference. Why clap? This is not becoming of a real sportsman.... What if we lost! We didn't run away from the field, didn't cry, didn't cheat. We'll play again, just let's regain our breath. We'll learn from you, and shall definitely win one day. (Premchand 1925: 476)

In the novel, in a symbolic representation, capitalist industrialization is equated with colonialism, which seeks to uproot the people. The village community becomes a microcosm for the nation and the resistance offered by the villagers is symbolic of Indian people's struggle for freedom from colonial rule. Surdas is a literary incarnation of Gandhi and his method of struggle is indicative of the Gandhian emphasis on non-violent and moral struggle.

Premchand's strident criticism of modern industry came a little late in his life. Earlier, during the Swadeshi Movement (1905–08), he was not averse to the development of modern industries, if it was in Indian hands. In 1905 he wrote for the promotion of Indian industries, exhorted his countrymen not to use British goods, chided some of them for being fond of foreign things and suggested various ways of establishing factories (Premchand 1962: Vol. 1, 17–22).

Ideas of civilizational conflict had taken roots in Premchand's thoughts quite early. In an article written in 1912, he talked about such a conflict in terms of Western versus Oriental, particularly Christian versus Hindu civilizations. This binary was basically derived from some

of the nineteenth-century nationalist-reformist thoughts. Although he conceded that the Christian religion and Western civilization had done much to improve the material qualities of life, he contended that the Hindu-Buddhist civilization was also not lacking in the care of the physical well-being of its people. Waterworks, hospitals, irrigation channels and other public services had been constructed for public benefit since time immemorial by Hindu and Buddhist kings of India and Sri Lanka. Moreover, these efforts, on the part of the state, were on behalf of religion and were selfless activities in contrast to Western ventures, where there were political and commercial interests. He, therefore, concluded: 'The civilization which uses religion for political goals, and in which the missionary always happens to be the flagbearer for the victor cannot show way to the Hindu and Buddhist religions. To conquer the countries is one thing, but high civilization is another thing' (Premchand 1962: Vol. 1, 174–82).

By 1919, however, his perspective about civilizational conflict had radically changed. In an important article, entitled 'Purana Zamana, Naya Zamana' ([The Old Age and the New Age] 1962), he now posed this conflict in temporal terms. Ignoring all historical wisdom, he declared that the 'ancient civilization was within the reach of everyone and was democratic'. It did not demean the unprivileged and did not erect a wall between the rich and the poor. Everyone, from the king to the pauper, had respect for knowledge and devotion. The old age, therefore, could be defined as 'the civilization of soul and of proper conduct'. The new age, on the other hand, is based on selfishness, materialism, hypocrisy and arrogance. He also criticized the modern industrial system which led to the ruin of villages, while causing tremendous growth of population in cities. Such development forced the people 'to spend their lives in the dark and stinking hovels' in large commercial centres, where community control was no longer effective and people were becoming victims of lust and where women were obliged to sell their bodies. Here, freedom-loving people were 'becoming the slaves of the capitalists.... and knowledge, art and spirituality were caught in the trap of profit and loss'. Premchand is especially harsh on modern, particularly Western, nationalism, which, according to him, had turned the world into a bloody battlefield, eliminated the subject peoples in Africa and elsewhere, and made selfishness a way of life (*ibid.*: Vol. 1, 258–69).

From this time on he remained bitterly critical of capitalism and the European brand of nationalism, which he considered to be the hallmarks of modern Western civilization. He thought that 'Nationalism is the scourge of modern age' (ibid.: Vol. 2, 333) and stated that: '[T]he modern nation is an European invention and nationalism is the curse of modern age.... This nationalism, by giving birth to imperialism, capitalism, etc., has created mayhem in the world' (ibid.: Vol. 2, 99).

He believed that: '[I]f the modern civilization has, on the one hand, produced goods for comfort, it, on the other hand, has created means of destruction .... It has inspired the stronger nations to oppress the weaker ones, to kill the poor and to torture them' (ibid.: Vol. 2, 26). He lamented, '[T]he high and pious ideal of universal brotherhood has been so badly trampled upon by this nationalism that even its traces are not left' (ibid.: Vol. 2, 100). But he was hopeful too: 'This selfish factionalism known as nation, which has turned the world into hell, seems to be breaking down' (ibid.: Vol. 2, 101).

He was equally forthright on modern industry which he considered to be harmful to the people and village communities: 'Ours is an agricultural country.... Therefore, we cannot establish big factories here, because that will force the workers to live in the cities. They will fall prey to various vices and will be destroyed physically and morally' (ibid.: Vol. 2, 280). In a famous article 'The Commercial Civilization', written towards the end of his life, he defined the modern age as greed for money. He equated it completely with commercialism where everything is done for money. If a country establishes its rule over another country, it is so that the capitalists and traders can make maximum profit. In this sense, the world today is ruled by capitalists and traders (Premchand 1988: 595–602).

Therefore, from 1919 till his death in 1936, Premchand remained critical of modern civilization in various degrees. He considered nationalism and commercialism as two most important aspects of it, as it also gave rise to the modern industry. He contrasted it to what he stated as the 'old age' or 'ancient civilization' by posing an almost binary opposition between the two. But, as we will try to show in the following section, this posed opposition is not unproblematic as it held within it inconsistencies and contradictions (for a detailed discussion, see Sharma 1999: 35–46).

The influences on Premchand are varied and complex, often compounded by his inconsistencies (see Rai 1991 and Gopal 1964).

During the Swadeshi Movement, he was much enthused by the prevailing nationalist fervour about building Indian-owned modern industry. He even wrote to interested persons suggesting ways to establish such units. During this period his notion about a civilizational conflict was basically in religious and territorial terms. In conformity with the reformist and nationalist thoughts of the nineteenth century, the West and Christianity were considered as the cultural opponents. This religion-oriented opposition was caused and strengthened by aggressive and mindless missionary propaganda denouncing Indian religious systems, particularly Hinduism. In the North-West Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) the missionary propaganda generated bitter feelings and invited equally sectarian counter-attacks (Dalmia 1997: 107–17, 341–51). The defence of Indian religious and cultural traditions formed the staple of many nineteenth-century reform movements. The influence of the Arya Samaj and Vivekanand on Premchand might have induced this anti-Christian streak in him (Raychaudhuri 1988).

By 1919, Premchand had become receptive to newer and stronger influences. The arrival of Gandhi on the Indian political scene with his principle of non-violence and a radically new method of struggle became a major source of inspiration. Simultaneously, the Russian Revolution, with its strong emphasis on the welfare of the poor and downtrodden, also powerfully affected him. Even earlier, he had pro-poor sentiments, but the Russian Revolution strengthened these feelings. He had also derived some of his ideas from Tolstoy and the influence of Gandhi further reinforced them. The new influences, however, did not drive out some older and contrary ones. In fact, Premchand uncritically utilized all forms of thought to put forward his arguments. The aforementioned article 'The Old Age and the New Age', written in 1919, reveals the profound confusion in his thinking. The varied influences remain unreconciled in the presentation. While criticizing the modern age, he derived mostly from Gandhi. The same influence is evident in his censure of modern industries and the commercial spirit. But when it came to the denunciation of the modern nation-state, he seems to derive from the anarchist ideas of Tolstoy as well as from Gandhi.<sup>1</sup> However, when praising pre-modern kings and rulers, the earlier Indian nationalist influences come into effect. But when he reposes his faith in the workers and peasants and visualizes them as the only hope for the future, he seems influenced

by the Socialist–Marxist tradition and the Russian Revolution. Soon, however, he considered Wilson’s League of Nations as the ‘ray of hope in the profound darkness permeating the new age of mutual tension and rivalry, arrogance and materialism’ (Premchand 1962: Vol. 1, 266). In all these, he did not achieve any logical consistency and does not even appear fully aware of either of these streams of thought.

Similarly, while putting a reformed Hinduism in opposition to Christianity and other supposed offshoots of modern civilization, he little realizes that this conception of a unitary Hinduism is a modern phenomenon developed under colonial influences and is as much a modernist/colonial construct as the justification for industrialism (for a detailed discussion on this theme, see Dalmia and von Stietencron 1995). Moreover, in his enthusiasm to defend Hinduism, he fails to comprehend and often belittles Christianity. In fact, his criticism of Christianity is as ill-informed as the denunciation of Hinduism by some of the Christian missionaries in India. Here, his thoughts are at odds with those of Gandhi who much admired Christianity and derived much from it. Premchand’s inadequate, often misleading, understanding of Christianity and his uncritical defence of Hinduism as a liberal monolith puts him in the same stream of cultural defenders who often imputed practically non-existent values to Hinduism and consistently failed to see its negative sides.

On the other hand, at the village level, his defence of community against the brutal onslaught of industrialization is more sensitive and people-oriented. Here, his conceptualization of the people’s religion as a mix of various tendencies is also more realistic. The arguments against the abrupt uprooting of rural communities to pave the way for industrial development also sound more reasonable. So, while the philosophical peregrinations of the urban elite and their romantic activities for national liberation often appear utopian, the desperate fight of a divided rural community against its erosion is far more credible and realistic. Thus, while the resistance to industrialism in the text is rooted in popular culture, the national regeneration project of the urban elite seems to have predominantly derived from the nostalgia for an imaginary Hindu past. The romantic escapades of Vinay and Sophia and the cultural sectarianism of the city-based nationalist elite point to the Hindu nationalist ideology in the tradition of Bankim and Vivekanand.

We can, therefore, conclude that Premchand's opposition to colonialism and modernism based at two different levels. The intense suffering of the common people and the erosion of the village communities under colonial rule provided the grounds on which much of his fictional world was constructed. Here, his empathy with the sufferers was profound and he wrote extensively on various aspects of their travails. At another level, however, his identification with a middle-class nationalism, which was open to several, sometimes contrary, influences, made him subject to contradictions that he was unable to overcome and which created fissures in his stance against colonial modernity.

## Note

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1. For Gandhi's antipathy towards the modern state, see Parekh (1989: 74).

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# 12

## STREET THEATRE IN MAHARASHTRA

HEMA RAIRKAR

In June 1991 fifteen peasant women and two male animators from among the rural cultural action groups *Garīb Dongarī Saṅghatnā* (GDS) of the Village Community Development Association (VCDA) in Pune district set up a study group on the issue of deserted women under my direction. The participants were all social animators actually involved in helping out deserted women, personally, at home in their own families or at their in-laws', and of course in court. This problem, in magnitude and seriousness, goes beyond the personal and family dimensions of each case considered. Being of a collective nature, it had to be studied as a global socio-cultural fact. The VCDA decided to constitute a specific research action study group for identifying the collective attitudes, the social and cultural structures, and the system of values that prompt and motivate this generalized practice. The final intention was for the members of the group to be able to denounce them with full knowledge of the facts, in adequate terms and forms.

With this in view, in order to have an impact on public opinion as a whole, it appeared appropriate to give priority to the popular form of street play in addition to other usual forms: personal exchanges, circles for reflection and training, discussion in small groups in farm-houses, village general meetings and personalized legal interventions. Besides all these forms of communication, and to enhance their impact, it was felt necessary to rely on a dramatic expression meant to massively reach and address the people on the streets as a whole. The study group, as a consequence, decided to present the result of its

exchanges in a street drama form to which they gave the name 'Social Trap'. An account of some reflections resulting from that particular experiment are presented in this chapter.

## A Spontaneous Performance

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The first specific characteristic of street drama is the spontaneity of verbal and physical expressions. I mean that neither the speech nor the gestures follow a text or a form written down beforehand as a formal code to be perfectly repeated, but rather the requirements of the extempore dialogue and improvised action of the performers. At the time of the performance, the artist tries to be faithful to a concrete situation which he or she has in mind as the only source of inspiration for his or her words and acting. The direct or immediate relation between the event and the dramatic performance gives an effectiveness of its own to the traditional forms of people's theatre, be it entertainment or education.

Now, when the next morning the group evaluated the first collective attempt made the previous evening, from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m., to give shape to a show it was found that the spontaneity dragged it to lengths which could not but be boring for the spectators. A dramatic expression could not be a free discussion. So what was the alternative? It was decided to determine the content of action and dialogue beforehand and discuss each concrete improvisation together later, one by one. This led to discovering the necessity and advantage of a constantly deeper and permanent exchange to reach a better comprehension of the essential contents and chalk out a sharper articulation through words and gestures of the same.

One of the animators noted down the main phrases used by the actors during improvisation to evaluate their relevance and effect. The group, for instance, discovered the existence of sayings or short, well-coined and very effective verbal forms used, for example, by men when they want to reduce women to silence. It was decided to locate these speech forms and give them a privileged position.

At the time of the performance, when the actress is actually upset to the point of losing the required presence of mind and, as a consequence, forgets at the required moment the prepared key phrases,

the spontaneity tends to extend the performance towards secondary themes through lack of mental and emotional control. Such rambling cannot be avoided by writing down the text for two reasons: the actresses (often illiterate or quasi-illiterate) are not used to reading or learning the text by heart, like school-going children; second, such recitation of a text would for sure kill spontaneity and creativity. The only solution is that preparatory sessions must concentrate on learning the key phrases and remembering their location at the right moment of the performance. This is the only way to: (a) reduce apprehension and mental tension; (b) to respect and enhance the creative spontaneity of the oral tradition of peasant women who have hardly gone to school; and (c) to safeguard the lively pace of the performance. In any case, the spectators themselves do not have either the habit of concentrating on the linear logic of verbal dialogues, especially as the performances are always given in the open; key gestures, keywords, typical practices and values have to be projected well and quickly, in chosen and calculated words, to be effectively received.

The relevance and novelty of such experiments and investigation of feminine spontaneity must be understood in relation to five parameters:

1. The street play, by its very name, points to a form of expression belonging exclusively to groups of urban youths. It had never existed in villages for the simple reason that there were no action groups to perform there, barring local exceptions, before the 1970s. Even male villagers have never performed in the lanes or squares of their village in the name of modern concepts of structural transformations. Peasant women have everything to learn, the boldness to begin with, let alone the right to perform in public.
2. Modern media (films and TV) propose and validate forms of expression and content that prove to be rather a handicap to their desire for autonomous expression.
3. Social, cultural and even political movements have resorted to various traditional forms of folk theatre as these latter could legitimize their effort in the eyes of the public (three examples are well known in Maharashtra: 'Tamasha' with J. Phule, 'Jalsa' with A. Sathe and B.R. Ambedkar and 'Bharud' for moral and religious purposes). But first, common peasant women as a whole are

not as conversant as these performers are with these folk forms (the performers were professionals belonging to specific, and often even untouchable castes), though they are familiar with the performances and their contents. Moreover, traditional folk forms (especially religious forms: *gondhal*, *kirtan* and *katha*)<sup>1</sup> are appropriated today by various kinds of social and political interests.

4. The flourishing modern professional and amateur theatre in the city is unknown to them.
5. The expression of feminine dramatic forms was a profession of the courtesans.

## Choice of Expressive Forms

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The fifteen female and two male animators of the VCDA study group on the phenomenon of the desertion of young married women by their in-laws found many reasons for this rejection; such was already the case with the harassment of women by their husbands and in-laws. An analysis made in a study group of all these reasons has not much in common with the requirements of a dramatic action. How to stage and project the results of the analysis in a play to be performed in the village square? The wish to stage the results of the investigation met with a question, that of the choice of subject. Then came the requirement of finding the form of physical expression adequate to the subjects. But how were they to decide on these issues? It was decided to choose subjects and forms which go better with a visual representation. Five central themes came forward: committing suicide by setting oneself on fire, committing suicide by jumping into a well, suspicious in-laws, polygamy and exorbitant dowry. The first two themes were immediately chosen because the group was particularly impressed by two recent accounts of such suicides.

As these themes were not internally linked with one another, how could one go from one to the other in the play? It was decided to link them by dancing in a circle between each figure with a song accompanying it. For this form corresponds to the customary practice of women singing and dancing in a circle at the time of *Gauri* and *Nag Panchami* (these are women's festivals, generally in the months

of August and September, when women sing and dance in circle). As for the accompanying songs, some were chosen from those known to the cultural action groups of the VCDA and others on the basis of their relation with the tradition, but all relating to the difficulty of women's condition.

As the play had to be performed in a public place, in the open, the entire group of actors and actresses was going to remain permanently present and visible at the centre of the crowd of spectators, with each actor coming to the centre of the circle according to the requirements of his or her role. But as everyone did not have a precise role to play in a scene at the same time, it was decided that those who did not would project the various routine jobs in the life of a country woman by miming silently, with the intention of maintaining continuously the concrete images of the women's condition as a background that would be visible all the time. These included collecting the dung from cowsheds, grinding and pounding, fetching water and firewood, cooking, looking after children, sweeping and arranging, working in the fields, and so on. A village atmosphere was recreated, in which men's roles were also represented. As it would have been boring for each player to repeat the same action during the whole play, various male and female roles were listed and actors could enact one or the other at different moments of the play as per their liking. These small side scenes provided the opportunity for a lot of improvisations according to the mood of the actors at that instant. The main roles for each scene were assigned. As it was to be expected that women participants would sometimes be prevented from participating for various reasons, it was thought that in principle each woman participant should be able to substitute the absent companion at the last minute and, hence, be sufficiently informed about the roles by and large or at least a few of them.

The background mimes would not interfere with the main scenes, but it was decided that at certain precise moments, the actresses would sing the traditional women's songs of the millstone while grinding. This was in order to project the meaning of women's condition as this tradition has already articulated it even before present songs of action groups expressed it in more modern and more critical terms. It was necessary to show the absence of rupture of continuity with the past. These songs were also intended to allow older village women to

recognize themselves in the representation. Five songs were carefully chosen by the group as particularly consonant with the message of the play.

At one time, during the learning process, it was thought advisable to ask each actress to have an overall visual representation of the particular moments and movements of each scene and of all the scenes in their sequence to master the unfolding of the action better. Each scene was graphically projected on a board, then on a picture with the movements and the places of each one. As the drama was to be performed in a public place in the open, the spectators would always surround the actors and automatically delineate a circular space for the performance. One hundred round cardboards were prepared for each small action to help players decide upon and locate the places of their acting. The success of this detour proved to be very relative: the actresses were far from being used to a written vision of the reality and still less of their behaviour in a 'cartesian' space. The scenes meant to recreate the village atmosphere were also studied on such cardboards. It turned out that the use of a video camera and a TV screen, which would immediately show the actual gestures and behaviour, would have been more helpful in allowing the actresses to visualize their own gestures as well as the movements of them all. An attempt was made for such an exercise, but as the players saw themselves on the screen for the first time, they were naturally engrossed in closely observing their image and body and not paying attention to their overall movements and their global synchronization.

Regarding the choice of form and their concrete articulation, the experience suggests two things. The connection between social experience, analytical reflection, critical judgement and theatrical articulation builds up here at once in a definite socio-historical context, and with a view to inducing a process of transformation in this given context. All dramatic action must thus be localized and personalized in order to really be a carrier of a striking message. This is the specificity of this form as well as its touchstone. Today, in another time and another socio-cultural environment—the modern context of an action group—peasant women re-invent and link up with the intention of elders from whom they have unfortunately not been able to inherit the dramatic heritage. Still, the latter do not remain far from them in time, as exemplified by forms of popular drama, collective songs and dance by J. Phule, A. Sathe, B.R. Ambedkar, the Rashtra Seva

Dal (a youth forum of the Socialist Party), Amar Shek (an activist of the communist trade union movement in Bombay), not to mention a number of other contemporary action groups active in India since the 1970s. But the fact is that people's grassroots socio-cultural movements often succeeded and still succeed each other in a discontinued and erratic manner because of a lack of archives, historians, institutions to keep them alive for several generations and material means to maintain direct links among them. No wonder then similar forms are seen being re-invented time and again.

## Collective Shaping of the Play

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The peasant women animators who staged and performed the drama on deserted women had an initial experience of role-playing and improvisation of sketches. They were conversant with these means as support of their reflection, either in their own self-learning and training groups or in the meetings that they used to organize for children and other young people. Such role plays are often used to project events or small problems and they are called 'action' (*kruti* in Marathi). This 'action' is spontaneous, sporadic and momentary. They thought that their attempt of theatrical representation of the results of their analysis would not be more demanding nor require a long-term effort. Naturally, in the absence of further real experience, direct or indirect, of full actual dramatic performance, formal (on stage) or informal, they had no global visual perception of a full drama. They had attended popular performances such as 'Tamasha' and 'Bharud', but these forms did not provide them a model adequate to their needs of expression.

The first representations made them progressively realize that the task they had set for themselves was of another nature and demanded an effort on a different scale with regard to the time to be spent, the reflection to be made and the training to be undergone. The enthusiasm dropped. On the one hand, the VCDA insisted on a sustained effort to improve the quality of the performance and to render the experiment really effective and valid. On the other hand, their dramatic competence was initially too poor to gain authority in front of the other animators of the VCDA. Besides, they were highly apprehensive of the reactions of the public and were hesitant, for example, to act in the square of their own village.

A new enthusiasm dawned again with the initial successes in front of important village gatherings or in the public squares of big towns. This enthusiasm and their expectations grew still more when the possibility of a representation in Bombay, at the time of a seminar on folk traditions (which did not take place), was envisaged. An expert imparting dramatic training to amateur groups in Pune city came to see them once; he knew how to revive them in their effort for perfection by offering practical suggestions appropriate to their actual level of performance. Their sense of theatrical expression improved a little and they pursued their efforts and their progress in their monthly meetings.

The participation was meaningful with regard to the reflection that was required regarding the main reasons of desertion that needed to be shown and played out. For example, why do women commit suicide by setting themselves on fire? Two main reasons were singled out: out of resentment against the unjustified suspicions of the in-law family and against the harassment that women are subjected to because of delayed payment of dowry. Thus, the dowry theme. Polygamy was chosen because of the frequency and ease with which this practice spreads in the villages of the group members where men take a second wife with more and more impunity, simply sending the first one back and neglecting or refusing to divorce her. The importance of the phenomenon prompted the group to choose this theme.

Experience made them change the beginning of the representation. Instead of beginning with a suicide by burning, the group chose a song that enabled them to attract spectators and gave them time to gather. The other songs accompanying the dances in circles were also modified with a view to allowing the actors to prepare themselves for the next entry.

Often in this kind of theatrical intervention it is the women who ordinarily play men's roles. However, as one of the women argued, 'We, both men and women, are all used to holding meetings, to reflect and act together. What is wrong if men's roles are [indeed] played by male animators?' A special mental effort was necessary to conquer the apprehension which for this reason marked the first shows with mixed performance. Once that was overcome, another much more serious fear remained to be conquered: exhibiting oneself in one's own village, in front of known people. 'What will they say?' Getting rid of this reticence remains a slow and progressive process.

In time members of the group became accustomed to advising each other, with words, gestures, movements, intonation and the volume of voice. Considering the social control which inhibits the man/woman relations in a traditional society, four characteristic aspects of this effort of grassroots dramatic participation should be highlighted:

1. If this control on gender relations can be exercised within small groups of motivated social actors, it maintains its pressure outside in society at large. However, the experience gained in terms of personal relations within small groups proves to be the best stepping-stone for becoming bold in public spheres. Therefore, in this respect, the group must first think of itself as a relational laboratory.
2. That experience of another sort of rapport is all the more easily initiated in small groups with the play acting as a mediating vehicle.
3. The repressive control of women's behaviour in society is challenged here by means of two trump cards: the solidarity between the women of the group generates its own energy and the play offers to women, who have united to perform the show, an audience and an attentive collective hearing at the same time. Both of these are otherwise unthinkable in normal life.
4. Women and men performing together projects a form of relation which, in a play form, foreshadows a real alternative. No wonder that it was extremely difficult for actors to play roles of couples. They had to overcome tremendous inhibitions to succeed.

## Lessons and Reactions

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Between September 1992 and January 1998, the fifteen peasant women and two male animators of the VCDA gave fifty-two representations of their play lasting 30 to 40 minutes in central squares, public bus stops and market squares of several villages in seven *talukas* of Pune district (Maharashtra), in Aurangabad, Osmanabad and Ahmednagar districts (Maharashtra), one performance in Pune city and one in Delhi at the time of an international seminar. The reactions of women spectators, themselves the first target audience, help us draw the first lessons of the experience.

The common reactions can be summarized in the following phrases, which are regularly heard from women who have had no other experience of life than the routine:

- 'You have shown that in the public place, in front of everyone, that's good. It deserved to be said once and for all.'
- 'We had to listen to sermons these last seven evenings. But your play had a lot of effect.'
- 'Come to perform in our place one day; it is necessary that everybody sees this. There are many similar cases in our village. An intervention coming from outside like that can have an effect.'
- 'You show the reality exactly as it is. But what to do?'
- 'You show actual everyday life. I thought that you wanted to entertain us. But why is it that we have to see again what we are putting up with everyday?'
- 'You have opened our eyes.'

More personalized reactions are noted. Young girls of 15 or 16 years of age, about to be married off by their parents, say: 'You show how a husband brings a second wife. Why not rather show that he looks for one but he does not find anyone?' Undoubtedly, these young girls fear a situation which threatens them and causes them anguish.

A frequent retort is: 'You have shown how it is; it is always women who are punished. There is never any punishment for men. Why only women? Men must also be punished. Do a play to show this.' Women do not expect only a punishment in the strict sense of the term, but the defeat of men, for example, by adding their (women's) names in titles of landed property of the husband, or securing an alimony in case they are sent back to their parents. This is a demand for recognition and dignity.

Women of small Marwari traders are strictly confined to their shops and homes, solely submerged in religious rituals, going out only to go to a temple in the village or to pilgrimages. No social communication of any sort is allowed. One of them came to a temple where the group was preparing itself, and under the pretext of devotion lingered at her ease around the group. The play was performed in front of her house in the street. She came out and served water to the actresses in order to whisper in their ears on the sly: 'I do not have a child. My in-laws

are harassing me.’ She came and went away with hasty steps so as not to arouse suspicion, but the expression on her face said it all.

A woman from the Mali caste said, ‘I wanted to act with you after seeing you. The next time, please tell me. I shall at least make a round with you.’ A Phasepardhi woman (a nomadic tribe generally placed at the bottom of the social structure and kept at a distance) in tatters, pregnant, a baby wrapped in rags on her back, saw the whole play, and wept from beginning to the end. She held out Rs 10 note in the end and said: ‘Give me back the money after taking Rs 2.’ It was not a question of paying the actors, but of expressing the link that united her to them.

A woman came to buy a goat at the market and was to leave in haste, as her husband was calling her. But she lingered, attracted to and happy to watch the play. Another poor old woman was returning from the market. Widowed since her youth, she had two daughters who were deserted by their husbands and had come back to her. She got them married again by borrowing money, which had not yet been returned. She wept, her body trembled and as if in a trance, bent and proclaimed incessantly: ‘These men must be punished!’ Anger was oozing out of her eyes. She forgot the bus that she had to take and sat down in order to totally identify herself with the play.

In the monthly meetings of the study group the performers used to report about the discussions that they had with spectators after each performance, not only about the play but also mainly about the issue of deserted women. This helped the group to reach a deeper understanding.

A few general remarks can be made regarding the reactions. There is a strong male support, especially from those adults whose daughters, sisters or mothers have had the same experience. Young enthusiastic people invite the group to come and perform in their village for the village women as ‘it is necessary that the public knows and understands how they spoil the lives of these girls’. Other frequent public refrains were:

- ‘You don’t show yourself in the market place for pleasure.’
- ‘Dowry must be stopped.’
- ‘This is the reality, but society is blind.’
- ‘You have done well to ridicule those who act in this manner.’
- ‘It is correct, they are right.’

And yet, why do young males remain powerless in front of the wishes of their elders when they get married?

The mirror effect is essential. But how does one transform the anger and assent of the public into action? The women actors overcome their inhibitions in front of these reactions. They embolden themselves in communicating with the public, confident about their capacity to directly attack public opinion, and in turn experience the power of being able to do so.

The performances gave animators the opportunity to establish contacts in new villages. The play was not an end, but the medium to spread and strengthen the organizational and socio-cultural activities of the GDS.

## One of the Least Mediated Forms of Communication

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Two performances were given in 1994 in an unusual context. I report them to highlight the potential of direct expression of street theatre. In other words, we have here one of the least mediated forms of communication.

The first instance was on 30 January at Aurangabad. The Socialist Front, a group of political militants who try to build a socialist movement rooted in the people and addressing their basic questions, organized a mass meeting for the whole of Maharashtra on the issue of deserted women. A number of social action groups, all over the state, focus on this issue and retaliate in various ways (seminars, articles, demonstrations, lectures, meetings, books, pamphlets, declarations and so on). They take pains to bring from rural areas and cities a large number of women from humble origins, particularly deserted women. However, many of them intervene with a view inspired by employment opportunities, and working conditions and lifestyles specific to a modern urban milieu. Their activists are recruited from among educated middle-class women, who speak a language of liberation which hardly has roots in the culture of common peasant women. The latter, once illtreated or rejected, most often remain isolated and defenceless. Then city-based groups get around to intervene on their behalf, take up their cases in court, or advise them about legal

rights and procedures. Nevertheless, often the solutions envisaged hardly take into account the daily socio-cultural constraints imposed on common peasant women or the traditional forces that control the civil society with more force and authority than the laws of modern legislators. Moreover, the form and steps of the interventions may not fully incorporate humble women in distress in the handling of their cases with full and equal initiative. Eventually, ripostes and tactics float above the hard social and cultural realities, and are hardly favourable to the emergence of a truly popular collective movement of the concerned women. It is in this context that one should understand the reactions to the play 'Social Trap', a collective creation of a team of peasant women only.

It is a fact that the audience listened to and followed the play flabbergasted. Some women from the audience were visibly upset by the scenes that were presented. Many of them, who had come from areas that were far away from each other in Maharashtra, sang in chorus along with the actresses and the songs of the millstone that the latter had taken up as a running comment of the life scenes that were re-enacted. Why was there such an impact? In the interval, when the team of GDS artists went to a cheap restaurant, 50 m away from the podium, to have a cup of tea, it took them 40 minutes to cross the distance, as they were assailed by the spectators. What the latter wanted to say can be summed up as follows:

You are women like us, poor, peasants, without education. What could you have done to gain so much boldness, climb on a stage, exhibit and play the roles yourself, speak as you do, sing traditional songs, show how one dances in circle on festival days? When you sang the opening phrases of the songs of the millstone, we knew them all by heart. We said to ourselves, 'This is not a play at all.' We were not in Aurangabad, but at home, in the village, in the slum. We were seeing and living our everyday life again. It is not a play that you are showing, it is the truth.

A number of women were in tears unable to say a word; their hands were shaking. They found it necessary to touch each other in order to express and share their emotion, in a gesture of communion among those with a common destiny.

Some of the questions that the animator-actresses asked themselves in such circumstances was: 'What can one do to transcend the

obviously sentimental relation that the play has built up?' 'How does one reach beyond this emotional relationship?' 'How can this pre-critical awareness develop beyond the vibrant sharing of a common misfortune?' 'How could these spectators be made ready one day to not only feel, but to think on their own and to act for themselves?'

We may gather four lessons from this experiment:

1. Street theatre has its initial success when it arouses the hearts by making the actresses and spectators resound in unison. Identification with each other is its first springboard.
2. This identification was most effectively obtained on the day in question with older women through the use of traditional songs which had for ages already carried similar messages.
3. Street plays are not meant for teaching or preaching, nor entertaining or 'playing', but for shaking up emotional energy.
4. How can we go from dramatic action and psycho-drama to a well thought-out and organized social action?

The success emboldened the female actors to such a point that one of the animator-actresses addressed the audience of about 20,000 in the following words at the end of the meeting after the play, propounding one of its main intent:

Urban educated women keep everything in their control. Peasant women like us, we must remain out of the game. I am not asking, like a beggar, that we should be given the power to decide. In our small *Garīb Doṅgarī Saṅghaṭṇā* groups we always bring our own problems; we take our own decisions; we carry them out ourselves. If this manner of working spreads, a real women's movement will exist. Such a movement alone will then succeed in placing the problems in their true perspective, and will correct the paths that are taken to solve them.

The assembly greeted these remarks without flinching. Many of the women assembled had been 'brought' there by urbanized leaders of associations, who, while addressing their speeches to the audience, kept them seated, dumb and apparently listening with an empty mind. The quick-fire words of a peasant woman like themselves suddenly revealed in their own language what they had experienced. On hearing their companions express their reactions later, the group of peasant actresses

realized that these women had quickly understood the message of autonomy addressed by one among them.

The second instance took place on International Women's Day, 8 March, in 1994. The group presented its play in Pune to an urban audience of the Alliance Française in the city. Used to playing in villages only to raise rural public opinion against the increasing trend of desertion in the countryside, peasant women actors ventured that day to address an audience of urban middle class well-wishers. That audience is as much alien to them as their life conditions and socio-cultural activities in villages are to the audience. The performers were, therefore, apprehensive. Moreover, some players were absent and others had to make up for them.

One immediate aim was to put in direct contact an audience of educated, urban and better-off spectators and poor, almost illiterate peasant women involved in social action in their villages through that particular form of intervention, their own play and performance 'Social Trap'. The difficulty of communication was due to the differences that opposed a spontaneous theatrical expression of socio-cultural peasant activists to the aesthetic forms of the urban proscenium theatre in terms of language, social realities, forms of expression and behavioural habits of the audience. The urban spectators watched in silence and clapped at the end, waiting for the show to be over to express their reactions; in villages, however, reactions and participation were more immediately expressed. The players had to mentally cope with this silence of the audience. The show was, moreover, performed at night, under light and in the open with a platform used as stage. This also created a distance between the performers and spectators.

A real rapport of direct exchanges started only after the play. Then all apprehensions vanished. To the surprise of the women social animators, who were not expecting this, spectators went to meet the actors, get acquainted with them and give their reactions on their own accord. Nine types of reaction can be distinguished.

1. 'Right at the start, when you appeared on stage, we were wondering whether peasant women like you would really be able to play. We had come resigned to simply to while away some time. As we were here, we were ready to stay till the end. But as soon as you began to talk, hearing the initial slogans, watching

the dances in a circle, we realized that you had something different to tell us.'

2. 'This looks authentic, true. We forget that we came to attend a theatrical show.'
3. 'Your involvement is certain. You are convincing. This cannot fail to impress a large rural audience.'
4. 'The words were right, the language strong, the sayings appropriate. What daring you need to speak so frankly! The dialogues carry the message.'
5. 'You raise fundamental questions and display their real dimensions. You reveal important social realities.'
6. 'You preach new ways. We would like to ask you whether you practice them first.'
7. 'You might even strike with greater force if you were preparing a play on the arrogance of local leaders.'
8. 'Why not learn karate for your self-defence?'
9. 'The physical and mental torture of deserted women that you have displayed, high-caste urban women also experience it, but with a difference, as they tend to secretly bear their lot in silence. You are able to denounce it openly. They do not have that courage.'

The women actors were satisfied to have been able, eventually, to change the perception of certain urban educated people that common peasant women like themselves were to be looked upon with condescension.

Finally, I would like to add one single comment on the advice given to country women to learn self-defence against sexual aggressors. The suggestion, on the one hand, underscores the necessity and relevance of a real physical education and training being imparted to women as much as to men. At the time of Ambedkar and under his inspiration conferences of Untouchable women had put forward the same claim in a perspective of gender equality. On the other hand, the advice given by high-caste representatives may show an undue preference for physical force in lieu of mental strength as if the issue was one of physical ascendancy to be countered by a fitting physical riposte. Some Hindu ideologues at the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the most vocal on this being Sawarkar from Pune, had advocated similar values in the name of social reform. A fraction of the high-caste Hindu

urban elite entertains a sort of veneration for physical force, inclusive of war, as a way towards social regeneration and moral re-armament. Street theatre, on the contrary, makes a point to appeal to the reflexive capacity of the person in the street to challenge and change public opinion.

## Note

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- 1 *Gondhal* is a celebration with songs and dances lasting a full night in the name of some goddess, performed by the Gondhali, a caste with low status. *Kirtan* is a sermon generally delivered by higher-caste male preachers trained to that skill in their family for generations or by institutions. *Katha* is a narrative transmitted by storytellers.

## ACTION THEATRE IN BELGIUM\*

PAUL BIOT

The Action Theatre movement vindicates the following ideas:

1. Each human being should be able to create their part in culture. It is especially a right for the poor, the marginalized, the exploited people to: *(a)* be creative with their own history, their disadvantages, even their tragedy; and *(b)* imagine words, forms and artistic proposals meant to display and analyze their situation. In order to change the world, we have to grasp it with our mind.
2. The art that we use is dramatic expression with no limitations on style or form (whether traditional and classical, contemporary or mixed, indoors or outdoors in the street, and so on), but we retain only those styles and forms that are imagined, created and produced collectively and played by the very people who created them.
3. The companies' members, the so-called 'dramatist animators of action theatre',<sup>1</sup> do everything to help collectives and groups to perform to their aims. They also possibly create, in the same

\* This paper is a transcription of Paul Biot's intervention in the international seminar Popular Cultures and Socio-Cultural Action held in BAIF Centre, Pune, 2–8 January 1998. This seminar was organized by the Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (CCRSS) with the support of the Charles-Léopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humankind (FPH).

collective process, their own performance as support of action for change.

When I was one of those '*comédien-animateurs*', I participated in the collective realization of about seventy collective original dramatic creations with more than fifty people involved in each dramatic creation. These are a few small stones which I would like to cast:

1. Popular culture does not exist! Because culture without people is not culture but aesthetic products and expediency, matters carried out by communication systems or goods enforced by education.
2. When we create a dramatic performance with people, the same fight exists between 'art' and 'non-art' as between self-declared 'classical culture' and what is pointed out as 'popular culture'. The crucial question is, who speaks and from where? Theatre has been since its origin a way of critical expression, and people have been using it a lot.
3. In that field too, culture began to lose its constitutive bond with people's creation and social development when it began to be an entertainment for the dominant classes in the society: kings, churches, *bourgeoisie* (upper middle class) and now, as in reality shows, the powers of the mass media. And then one began—in Europe anyway—to hear about the 'arts'. Thus, the spirit of creation of the people, their inventive forms, their ways of resistance and thinking are ignored most of the time, looked down upon or stolen. They were 'no art' and meant for 'no audience'. They were also without masters.
4. In the same way, the 'performing arts' (I specifically refer to dramatic performance) severe links with collective forms of creation ('collective' being understood in a variety of ways). Thus, the word 'art' is today in Europe almost only understood as originating in individuals (authors or artists). This process raises many questions on the conditions of cultural creations, their production and distribution.
5. What we call 'action' in our Action Theatre is as much a 'cry for justice' at the beginning of the process as the collective process of imagining and writing the performance, as, later, the meeting with the audiences to speak about contents and invent solutions.

Those familiar with the *Garīb Ḍoṅgarī Saṅghaṭṇā* (GDS) of Maharashtra will already be acquainted with the basics of our Action Theatre, which is run on the same lines (Biot 1996). Its constitutive elements and characteristics are defined by the following:

1. the people who resort to this kind of theatre;
2. their stakes, the modalities of collective creation;
3. the link between forms and contents, and the performer's personality; and
4. the symbols that are adjusted or created.

To this one may add:

1. the venue of the performance—a village in the example of the performance of the GDS;
2. the kind of audience that attends; and
3. the long-term impact that is expected.

And then we can answer the five questions of who, why, how, where and for whom.

Shekhar Pathak gives us another example, a bit different. He talks with cheerful enthusiasm about the struggle to save trees in Uttarakhand and the resistance movement that followed. They too created a play, and though we did not see it, that is exactly what we call 'action theatre'. When people attach themselves to trees as a shield, they have within themselves the potential to perform in a very significant and hard-hitting manner. This has nothing to do with any technical skills or know-how. You can again answer the same five questions—who, why, how, for whom and where—although in a different order, as the action took place before the play, whereas the play is only one of the tools of action.

We find examples of this approach all over the world, spanning generations, in different places and under different names, and very often unknown. For instance:

1. **Africa:** In Mali, the Kotéba, which Philippe Dauchez presented in this seminar; in Senegal, the Theatre of Social Awareness; in Burkina Faso, the Theatre for Development.

2. **South America:** The Theatre of the Oppressed; the Chiltak Theatre, a group of performers from the Zapata movement in Chiapas, Mexico.
3. **North America:** Various kinds of street theatre, like Bread and Puppet and the San Francisco Mime Troup; in Quebec, the Social Theatre.
4. **Europe:** In Israel, the Community Theatre; in England, the Authentic Theatre; in France, the Intervention Theatre; and our Action Theatre in Belgium.
5. **Asia:** In India, the Awareness Theatre and the Natya Chetana Cyclo Theatre in Orissa; in Tamil Nadu, the Kalakulu movement and the Terrakkuttu revival; in Delhi, Jagran.

These are only a few examples; there are numerous other. It is hard to see but no less true that there exists around the world a whole movement of resistance through theatre. I am, moreover, convinced that this kind of theatre is the very origin of dramatic arts. But this is a point often forgotten. I shall come back to it later.

First, a few words about the history of Action Theatre in Belgium. Belgium is a democratic federative kingdom in Western Europe, a highly developed society but with a serious amount of poverty, a growing rate of unemployment and a substantial amount of migrant workers from developing countries.

‘Traditional theatre’ as it is known in India does not exist any more in Belgium. It is the same thing with respect to what we like to call ‘popular theatre’. I use the term ‘popular’ with reference to a definition given by Denis-Constant Martin (Jules-Rosette and Martin 1997) who opposes a ‘mass culture’ to a ‘people’s culture’. A mass culture is an industrial product meant for the greatest number of clients or consumers, a product necessarily reduced, in my view, to a miserable and simplistic common denominator. A ‘people’s culture’ is explicitly defined as follows by the sociologist Stuart Hall (Hall 1981):

In a sense, popular culture always takes roots in experiences, memories and people’s traditions. It is associated with the hopes, aspirations and tragedies of a given locality. It incorporates those scenarios, which are integral parts of the everyday practices and lived experience of the population living in a given area.

Thirty years ago theatre in Belgium was either the 'classical theatre' of the great authors from the last centuries, mainly French authors); 'contemporary theatre', focusing on research in aesthetics; or 'entertainment theatre', mostly in the capital, but also reflected in small towns, often by amateur, non-professional troupes.

A few groups, especially university groups, played 'committed performances' as well.

But who were the people involved as spectators in these kinds of theatre? It was only 2 to 3 per cent of the population, and mainly the high and middle classes. No peasant, no workers: they were what we called in 1968 a 'non-audience'.<sup>2</sup> The university groups and several companies, therefore, decided to perform for that 'non-audience,' in places where these people were meeting. Obviously, some performances had to be adapted, but I will not go into these details. At the beginning of the 1970s these companies left the universities, and continued to perform and not be paid. I was a member of one of them.

In 1972, a group of young spectators asked whether they could borrow from us a very small scenery to create their own performance about their situation with their own ideas. One of us stayed with the group for a month. These youths hailed from families of Moroccan migrants; they had been born in Morocco but could come and live with their fathers in Belgium thanks to a policy of 'family reunification'. Many of them had to live in dilapidated areas of big cities, Brussels in particular. They all found themselves in the most hopeless schools, transiting from the ghetto of their residential area to a school that was itself a ghetto. They were not Belgian, but did not feel any more Moroccan. They wanted to exist as youth in Belgium, in Europe, in a big city like Brussels—a city with a pretension of internationality. They were wondering whether they would be forced to pack and return to Morocco with the luggage of their fathers, who had come in search of work but were given a tough welcome. They wrote and performed a play called 'Mohammed, Pack Up and Leave!' It was performed eight times and attended by hundreds of youth, and that is how Action Theatre was born. It has been growing till today. About fifty new plays have been added, and about 100 groups exist, who are organized into fifteen companies.

What is important to point out is that this kind of theatre appeared in Belgium as an 'original' and 'popular' medium recreated under many

different forms. By 'original' I mean with forms adapted to the places themselves (for instance, a light scenography), and worked out as the content is articulated and constructs itself progressively and in parallel to it. I use 'popular' in the sense earlier defined.

I insist on this: Action Theatre is not a form. It takes all forms. It is a theatre made by people themselves to narrate with their words and gestures, their eyes and their memory, their revolt, their hopes, their distress, their joys, how they see the world here and now, and how they want to change it. But this theatre is also contemporary theatre. Let me elaborate about the meaning of 'here and now' in the context of Action Theatre. Thirty important themes have been dealt with during the past decade. Among them are: women's words, oppression of women, cultural identity, indifference and loneliness in the city, racism and xenophobia, working conditions and workers' memory, violence in everyday life, north-south relationship, drugs, war and peace, ecology, unemployment, immigration, labour and the new generations.

Regarding matters of organization, the companies continue to create their own places and work with groups. We call them Workshops of Action Theatre. We work with the workshops to help them with collective methods of creation and analysis, but the members of the workshops remain the owners of their words and performances. As the GDS believes, they remain the absolute masters of their words.

I want to return to my hypothesis about the origin of theatre and its evolution. My reflections are related to what has already been said in the course of debates about the link between culture, society and politics. My reflections are based on what has been already said in the course of the debates about the link between culture, society and politics in this seminar. Some of you pointed out the danger of recuperation of popular cultures by dominant classes. With references to the theme 'Popular Cultures and Socio-Cultural Action', I want to stress that it is the union of both, which generates a real society and cultural strength. When 'popular cultures' have been recuperated, only 'socio-cultural action' remains, left alone and apart, in the hands of the high or middle classes. The latter undertake 'socio-cultural programmes', which actually prove to be nothing more than 'animation', 'pastime', 'entertainment', 'ideology' or even just 'words', not enough to change society. When 'popular culture' and 'cultural action' stand apart, popular culture loses its active meaning and is easily manipulated to serve alien purposes.

The first theatre was born among peasants, slaves and artisans, in the villages, on the roads, with storytellers, wanderers, healers, beggars, minstrels, people staging shows with trained animals, acrobats and players, and the like—all marginal people. I would like to quote a short text of J.M. Pradier regarding a discussion of the cultural history of Japan:<sup>3</sup>

Yoshiki Amino, a scholar of Japanese Middle Ages, suggests the concept of *hinôgyômin* for a marginal though important part of the population: all those who are not peasants but wander on the roads; not only hawkers, but healers, whores, monks, beggars, story tellers, mimics. Amino contends that all these people played a major role in the exchange of goods and ideas. They provided the background for the development of a collective social imaginary. In Karpacz, Eugenio Barba blamed historians of theatre for having forgotten the ‘non peasants’. In the process they have also forgotten that our own theatre was born from globetrotters, jolly jugglers, medicine men, travelling acrobats and animal leaders.

This is how the first theatre was born, which, I suppose, was projecting a critical vision.

Then some social actors developed the form. The art started becoming a profession. The performances left the villages, went to cities and into castles; they were played in front of the rich and the noble, those who could pay more. Since those people did not like to be criticized, aesthetic forms were chosen so as not to provoke those in power. The noblemen, the priests, the kings went on protecting the actors. Progressively, theatre, with regard to its forms as well as its role in society, started to distance itself from its origins and stand aloof from them; it actually ‘withdrew’ or ‘stood down’ while pretending to prune or purify itself. We also see a similar kind of evolution when sacred theatre becomes a ritual.

In both cases, theatre became an art. It has to be written and played only by specialists. Laypersons are just kept out or turned into passive spectators. In this evolution, theatre was stolen from the people. But, fortunately, it did not completely disappear. It has just been relegated in ‘non-art,’ as they say. In the same movement, people have been similarly pushed aside and relegated. People’s words have no echo. People become ‘nobody’. Theatre was once as much part of

the dominant political, social and economic power set-up as other cultural products. B. Narayan (1998) mentions a similar process in poetry and folk literature:

Power usually makes an attempt to develop a language of influence that maintains its command over the people .... Political parties use myths, social poetry and folklore to create a language for communicating with the masses. Through folk myths they attempt to revive and reconstruct the people's memories in their favour.

Fortunately, this evolution is part of a cycle. It would be interesting to study such cultural phenomena with notions of cycle, and see at which point the social and economic cycles cross the cultural cycles, differentiating between moments or periods of evolution and revolution.

Now the question of recovering of popular culture by dominant forces—not only political, but also those of the dominant culture is present even in Action Theatre. The danger is real not in the group with which I work, but in other companies. How can one avoid that danger? There are no simple answers. We have to be watchful. In the groups in which we work, we say, for instance:

1. A creation never stops evolving. It can and it has to evolve and be adapted. It is so because of new facts and new analyses; because it should be according to the proposition of the audience. Each spectator is a part of the play, not only to receive but also to give messages. Do not substitute yourself to the participants by overplaying your role, while at the same time maintaining an imaginary function and securing a dramatic effect.
2. Do not accept new techniques that you are not really sure of using easily. Technique is not neutral.

The system of recuperation is very subtle because very often it comes through the path of culture. Several of our companies aspire to be recognized through performing on stage. This is one of the ways of recuperation, and we have to remind people of the objectives against this. For instance, look at the *tamasha* performance (popular comedy performed by semi-professional groups) that we recently saw in a village: the mic was in the centre. Everything that was important was played in the

centre, standing up in front of the mic, in a relation of confrontation with the people who were sitting around. This is the way a prince or a star would address ordinary people. On the contrary, in the play of the GDS, 'Government Policy People's Death', a street drama performed during the seminar, many important things were prepared or made to happen on both sides, on the stage and in the audience. Grassroots people can thus take side in ongoing politics. Even if one is not aware of things, they still modify one's behaviour.

The stage is a reproduction of the way the group looks at society. On the stage everything is relevant, because it is also a place of power and of its reproduction. The organization of the space on the stage often reflects a vision of society. In classical theatre it often displays the vision that society wants to project of itself and locates the conflicts, but it does not question the system of power relationship; it only shows its excess.

On account of the glorifying effect that it has on the performers who occupy it, the stage may prove to be insidious in its displaying of power relations, especially when it shows political leaders. The dramatic performance may, often unknowingly but never without consequences, reinforce a conservative vision of the content which is presented, even though its message is overtly revolutionary. This is what we call the 'red velvet effect' or the counter-effect of the Brechtian theatre once played on prestigious national stages. Professionals may end up, sometimes against their wishes, as those who most effectively contribute to reinforcing the prevailing stratification that discriminates between those who know and can articulate what they know, and others. See in this respect the stars of the stage or the screen, who are interviewed and asked about their political or social vision of the world as the most knowledgeable sources of information, though they are obviously not more informed or competent than a great majority of ordinary citizens.

Every time you perform, you chose for whom you perform and for what. And do not pretend to become a star! The group is the star because the aim of the creation is to shed light on the people's way. No performer should be there for personal profit or the glory of his or her group. Each performer wants the audience to profit by the play, get some enlightenment, and find the courage to act upon it.

To conclude, I would like to talk about expression and emotion. Free expression is obviously necessary, but it is not sufficient. It is a condition, it is the beginning. The analysis of facts and mechanisms, and collective creation are also important; and even more important than pure expression, because Action Theatre is not a reflection of society but a particular point of view on it. As far as emotion is concerned, no theatrical play should be a reality show (a soap opera). Emotion is important, for sure, but when it relates to the stakes.

A show displays the ability of people to reverse or transform the assumptions of the dominant power in order to reconstruct the meaning of what has been imposed upon them. This also shows that people, in particular as a group or a community, have a lot of cultural resources to draw upon, their own vision of the world. For me, that stand is a postulate. It is the conviction according to which I commit myself to my work.

## Notes

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1. In French '*comédien animateur de théâtre-action*'.
2. In French, '*non public*'.
3. See more details in Pradier (1997).

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## Part 4

CONTESTATIONS

IN

PUBLIC SPACES

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# INTRODUCTION

EDITORS

The four contributions in this section focus on two different cultural forms of communication: the small image, a seemingly innocuous, inoffensive and lonely trifle; and the mass festival, carnival and pilgrimage, obviously crowd-pulling, impressive and compelling displays of collective beliefs—secular and religious. But this is a mistaken *prima facie* intelligence. A closer attention shows that they share two essential features. First, purposively by their ostentatious display in the open they intend to invest common and public spaces in order to overtly or covertly imprint the minds of the public at large. Second, this display turns common and public spaces into a stage where contending forces vie with one another to occupy the apron. Power and ambivalence pull the semantic potential of these forms apart into a number of directions. Implosion is their characteristic regime of communication.

## Intruding Orders

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The two essays gathered under this title shed light on the modes of circulation of symbolic representations, the enforcement of a prevailing social-economic and moral-political order, as well as the expectation of new configurations of the world. All this is rather forcefully embedded in seemingly neutral and insignificant cultural objects such as commercial images and calendar art in India. To the traveller, these pictures quickly go unnoticed because they are displayed everywhere, from the domestic kitchen to public places, offices, vehicles and on the packaging of indigenous consumer goods. Yet, perhaps

because of their 'invisible ubiquity' they have the potential of carrying, not only keys for a deciphering of the culture that circulates them, but also explicit or 'subliminal' messages that may play a crucial role in social, cultural and political transformations, including all sorts of manipulation of people's minds.

In their essay 'Ephemera, Communication and the Quest for Power: An Analysis of the Hindutva Phenomenon in Uttar Pradesh', Jayati Chaturvedi and Gyaneshwar Chaturvedi describe the usage of ephemera by Hindu nationalists as a potent means of communication with the north Indian Hindu multitudes, whereby messages are not constructed on verbal rhetorics, but rather as an inventive reappropriation of the format of Hindu religious texts with a specific rearrangement of traditional symbols: the saffron colour, metaphors, references to a glorious past, etc. However, while Orientalists might have looked at these pictures as static representations of 'the gentleness of the Hindu trampled upon through centuries by aggressors', the authors' contention is that, in the present cultural scene, the transformation and circulation of these pictures reflects an exhortation to the revitalization of a certain 'culture of power' aiming at the reconstruction of a grandiose Hindu self in which 'sentiments of collective resentment towards Semitic religions are invoked along with attempts to semitize Hinduism'.

Kajri Jain in 'When the Gods Go to Market: The Ritual Management of Desire in Indian Bazaar Art' looks at the same type of cultural objects: calendar pictures, notably the ones inspired by *Pushtimarg* and related strands of Vishnu worship. However, her analysis starts with a reassessment of the discourses of ethno-anthropology regarding 'art' and 'religion' as distinct categories, with the latter being split into 'tradition or culture, which is 'good', and ideology, which is 'bad', a restatement of colonial distinctions. Her criticism of neo-colonial (liberal-Christian), Marxist and Freudian dogmas regarding 'fetishism', a central feature in their shared vision of religiosity, illustrates a reflexive process in modern anthropology, by which local 'folk views' are preferred to distantiated analysis, sometimes up to the point of involving informants in the construction and evaluation of their own conceptual models. This reflexive process had also been invoked in Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi's attempt to reformulate visions of the Hindu social order.

Reflexivity works as a touchstone in Jain's paper when she contends that the denigration of fetishism by outsider's analyses

reveals an aspect of 'the fetish, as value-laden, animated, libidinalized object.... threaten[ing] a specifically liberal-bourgeois subject and its sovereignty'. In what she calls 'the ethos of the bazaar', pictorial 'statements' may be termed 'fetishist' in their capacity of forging a 'sense of moral community' across caste and social boundaries, as they stand at the intersection of distinct worlds—the social, the moral, religious and economic domains. This intersection is instrumental in establishing the merchant's creditworthiness, as the traditional Indian trading system is not regulated by banking, legal enforcement and centralized communication.<sup>1</sup> 'Bazaar economy' is undergoing radical transformations under the pressure of global trade, which carries an entirely novel set of moral–political values framed on the Euro-American concepts of 'sellers' and 'buyers' as autonomous subjects occasionally contracting 'individual acts of consumption'. In this reconfiguration of economic networks, the seemingly insubstantial images of religious calendars undergo substantive transformations which may be viewed as necessary adjustments to emerging cultural values. It remains that, in the present-day Indian economy increasingly ruled by the global market, these images still contribute to the maintenance of an ethos of the bazaar by reaffirming 'the divine.... as a great libidinal reservoir through repeated performative investments, somewhat in the manner of money-capital'.

## Contending Idioms

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The two contributions under this title look at community festivals as collective rituals, theatrical performances of sorts that depict the interplay of contrasted and often opposite socio-cultural dynamics simultaneously at work within the same symbolic configuration. For comparative purposes, two important but different types of festivals are selected in two different societies, in western Maharashtra, India, and Cape Town, South Africa. A variety of processes of inter-cultural confluence and confrontation are shown developing within each performance, but with comparable logics despite the great difference of expressive forms, such as a purely secular New Year festival and a massive religious pilgrimage. Both studies show how the various collective actors involved in the performances try to shape forms of

rapports symbolically effective of their inner needs, ideological claims, political demands or social expectations. In both cases the interplay of semantically ambivalent if not opposite figures develops within the context and under the pressure of systems of dominance, which stage in the background the rules of the scenarios, the roles and the modalities of the whole play to be performed and shown on the proscenium.

The interest of both studies is to reveal a variety of cultural dialectics incorporated in symbolic forms, which are closely observed and meticulously described by the authors. Confronted with agencies and social actors vying with one another for social control, subordinated communities are shown trying, in their own ways and with logics of their own, to assert themselves, transform given conditions to their advantage, or possibly invert established orders, through cultural idioms and symbolic conducts of theirs. Observing how available means of symbolic communication are appropriated to be differently invested by each actor, one is led to realize that indeed cultural idioms are contested carriers and stakes in a struggle for collective actors to construct reality as per their own will, but with very different fortunes.

The first chapter in this section is about the pilgrimage to Pandharpur in Maharashtra, western India, which since the thirteenth century has attracted impressive crowds annually from all over the region. The motivations that prompt pilgrims to participate and the communicative configurations that develop in these privileged circumstances between various social sections and actors, are studied by Jitendra Maid and Guy Poitevin in 'On the Way to Pahari'. The reference—and crucial point of departure—here is the problematic claim of the Bhakti (devotional faith). Movement of being capable of providing an alternative cultural context for attempts, on the part of all sections of the population but especially the underprivileged, to assemble and freely interact, irrespective of all types of discrimination, caste, gender or class, thanks to a potent symbolically egalitarian idiom. In short, the Bhakti culture, in that large concourse of people, would lay the foundation of a radical reversal of the Brahmanical, hierarchical and exploitative Hindu *dharma* or Order. The question addressed is: To what extent is the Bhakti symbolic framework able to materialize into forms of communication representative and supportive of such claims? Methodologically, the study focuses on the pilgrimage as a subsystem of social communication, which mirrors intricate, contrasted, confrontational, utopian and at the

same time ultimately repressive figures of communication, at the image of the texture of the whole social fabric of Maharashtrian society. At all levels, ambivalence and implosion prevail instead of explosion and egalitarian restructuring.

In 'The Famous Invincible Darkies' by Denis-Constant Martin, the New Year festival among the coloured in Cape Town is shown resorting for more than a century to various idioms of community self-identification and collective assertion. Despite poverty, scorn and segregation, the festival provides an occasion for expressing and strengthening a feeling of belonging. The identity displayed and asserted during the festival is totally opposed to the identity that white rulers in Pretoria wanted to impose upon coloured people. The latter, through the festival, claim in a symbolic way the right to a history of their own in order to reverse an original culture.

## Note

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1. A detailed analysis of these 'webs of trade' is proposed in Cadène and Vidal (1997). A thoughtful depiction of communication processes involved in 'clientelism' may also be found in Vidal (1993: 9–32).

## References

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**4.1**

***Intruding***

***Orders***

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## **EPHEMERA, COMMUNICATION AND THE QUEST FOR POWER: HINDUTVA IN UTTAR PRADESH**

JAYATI CHATURVEDI AND GYANESHWAR CHATURVEDI

Classical Western Orientalists have long romanticized the East. There is a need, however, to view the Orient in the clear and steady light of reason and, in the interest of greater understanding, demystify the perception of the East. Yet it has remained something of an enigma, wrapped in a dilemma, why a party which belongs to the Hindu right and carried the (unproved) odium of being the assassins of Gandhi in 1947 could make it to the centre in 1996, even though it was a only a thirteen-day wonder. In an early path-breaking study of Hindu nationalism, Bruce Graham (1990: 3–4, 91, 255) sought to explain why a party representing Hindu interests, while eliciting covert support of a large number of Hindus, failed to translate that support in terms of electoral success in a country where they (Hindus) were in a dominant numerical majority. Yet, within six years of that publication, the Hindu nationalists had formed a thirteen-day government in New Delhi. While this transient electoral victory was a cause for jubilation amongst its supporters (who viewed it as a stepping-stone to long-term power at the centre) it conjured up the spectre of authoritarian rule and persecution of the minorities in the minds of its critics and detractors.<sup>1</sup>

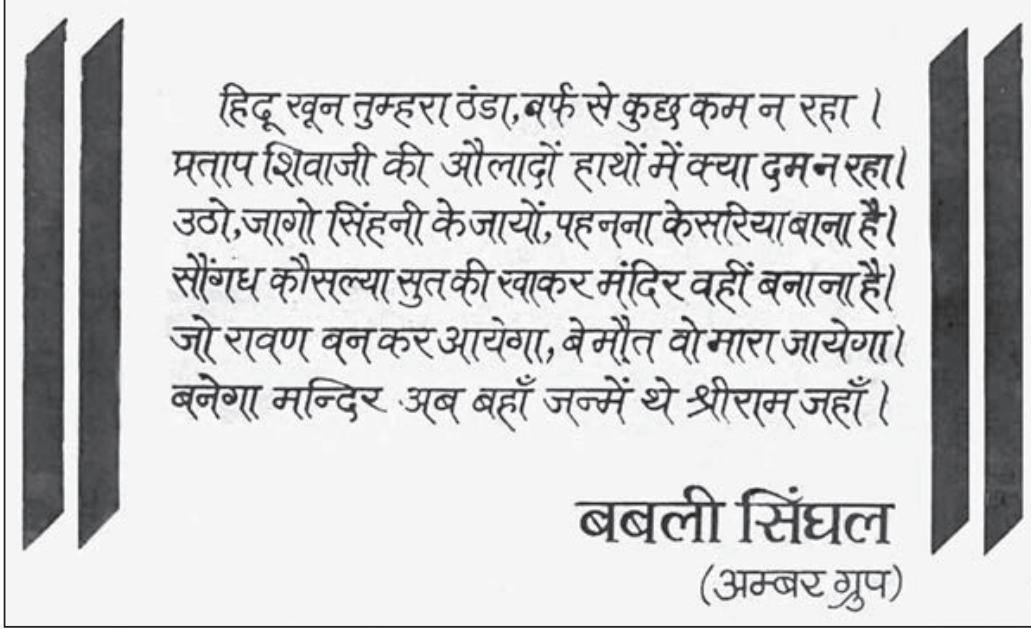
This chapter seeks to explain the Hindu nationalist party's meteoric rise to power through an analysis of its electoral and mobilizational ephemera. It also seeks to review how this ephemera, evoking forms of ancient Hindu culture and religion, serves as a potent means of communication with the Hindu multitudes, who are sought to be galvanized under the saffron banner. Ultimately this populist ephemera contributes towards the enhancement of the power of rightist Hindu forces.

While acknowledging that the party's six-year ascent to power has many contributing factors, this essay chooses to focus upon its communication with its Hindu constituency through the effective use of ephemera: greeting cards, postcards, calendars, stickers, pamphlets, badges, mementoes, souvenirs, slogans, audio-cassettes, and so on. This analysis limits its scope to the Hindi-speaking heartland—the province of Uttar Pradesh (UP)—which, despite its reputation for being the decisive factor in the formation of the central government, is often referred to, in elitist parlance, as the '*gobar* (cow dung) belt' due to its predominantly backward and mofussil character. No pejorative undertones are intended in phrases like 'narcissist rage' and so on, and they are sought to be used in a value-neutral sense. The essay also makes the point that whereas communication couched in the culture-specific idiom of the people is a powerful means, images, concepts and idioms drawn from another culture and supplanted on the native soil might succeed in producing an illusion of permanence but lose its ground in the long run. Specifically, the references to Hindu nationalism would include the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),<sup>2</sup> a shadowy, paternalist organization, omnipresent in the background, supplying a hard-core set of grass roots workers (*swayamsevaks*), as well as the ideology and technique of mobilization; the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), its political arm and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), its sword arm, with branches abroad, drawing sustenance from the cultural–nationalist sentiments of expatriate Indians. All three organizations, committed to safeguarding Hindu interests in the face of perceived threats, espouse a philosophy germane to agitational politics and a renewed assertion of a new aggressive Hindu identity, referred to as Hindutva (meaning Hinduness), very different in content from polymorphous Hinduism (see Nandy 1991).

The RSS, founded in Nagpur in 1925, claims to be an organization devoted to the cultural regeneration of Hindu Society. Shunning the ‘politics of the platform’ (*manch ki rajniti*), it found itself in a distinctly disadvantaged position when in the wake of Gandhi’s assassination: it came to have that disrepute clamped upon itself. Hindutva’s basic premises concerning culture and power are inexorably based upon Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

This indebtedness, for some obscure reason, is seldom overtly acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> Analyzing the causes of India’s prolonged subjugation as a nation, Bankim rejected the Orientalist construct that this stemmed from the perceived lack of physical strength and courage of the Hindus. It was perceived that the gentleness of the Hindu sprang from his emasculation. He, rather, attributed this long history of subjugation to their lack of natural desire for liberty. Hindus have never felt a compelling desire for their own liberty, nor have they ever fought for it. In the second instance, Bankim held that Hindu society’s subjection was owing to the lack of solidarity in their midst. Third, the Hindu attitude towards power is undermined and weakened by its religio-cultural emphasis on *vairagya* (renunciation and other-worldliness) and *niyati* (fatalism). Thus, Bankim’s explanation of the causes of India’s subjection is not in terms of material and physical strength, but is rather in terms of culture. More specifically, it is an explanation that owes its genesis to cultural differences—that while some cultural attributes make some civilizations particularly equipped for power, other opposite and specific attributes make Hindus notoriously negligent towards the same. Bankim, therefore, enunciated a specific relationship towards culture and power—that certain cultural values are more advantageous than others in the pursuance of power in the world of *realpolitik*. Since these attributes are not congenital characteristics, but the product of cultural conditioning, it can be negated through deconditioning and the converse cultivation of appropriate national-cultural values. This, in brief, is contemporary Hindu nationalism’s basic premise concerning culture and power and this premise is repeatedly evident in its mobilizational literature, verbal ideological discourse and through their ephemera (see Figure 14.1), which loosely translated would read as follows:

**Figure 14.1**  
**Hindu Nationalist Ephemera**



Source: Collected by the authors.

Your Hindu blood has gone cold, it is no less cold than ice,  
Sons of brave Shivaji are your hands bereft of power?  
Awake! Arise! you are born of lionesses; You have to wear the saffron  
headband,  
Swear by the son of Kaushaliya and resolve to build the temple  
there,  
He who comes as Ravana will die an untimely death,  
The temple will now be built there where Shri Ram was born!

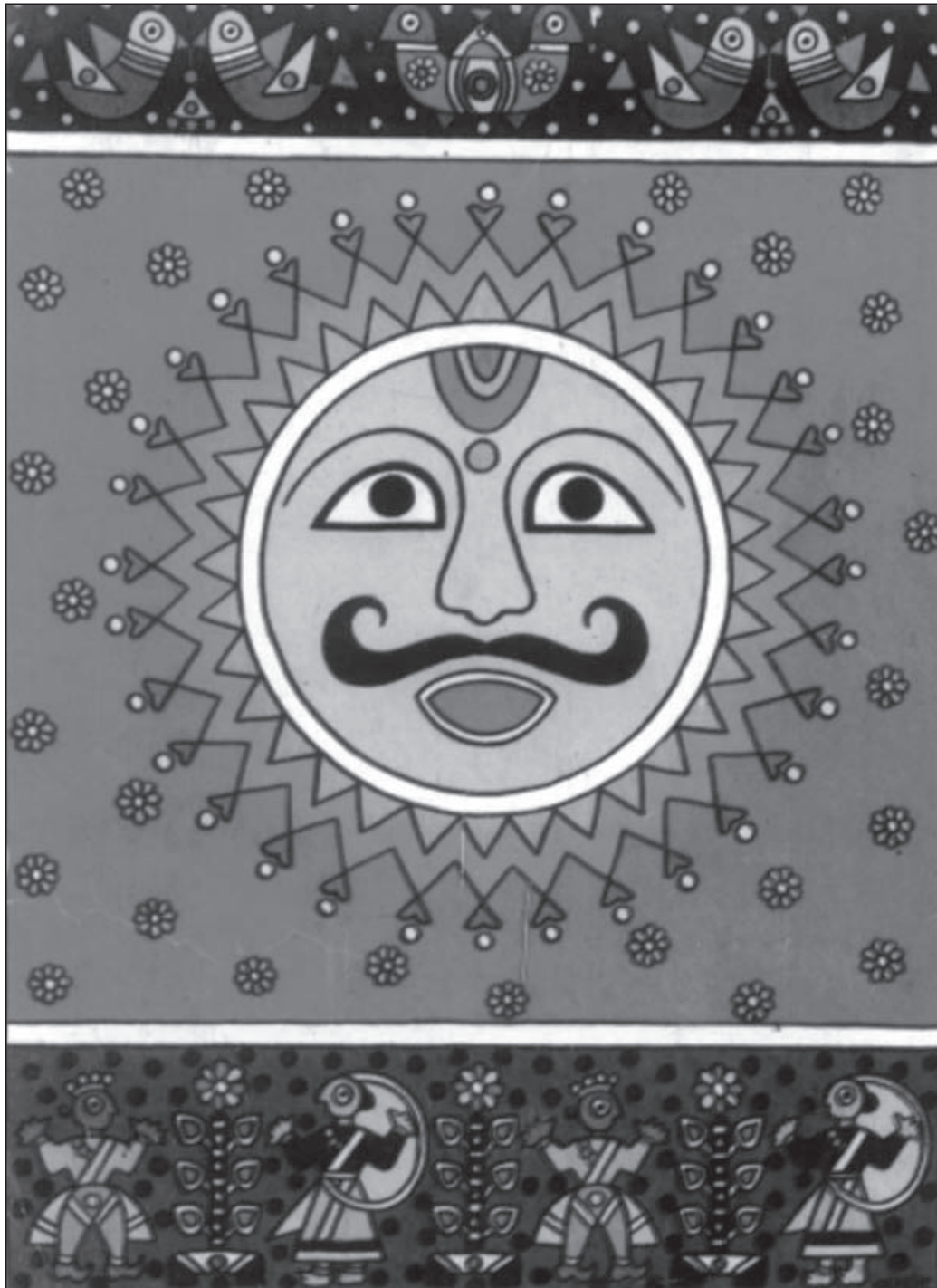
The format of the ephemera with broad margins on both sides is made to simulate the classic format of ancient Sanskrit Hindu religious texts like the *Bhṛigusamhita* containing forecasts and the ancient Ramayana text written on *bhojpatra* (tree bark). The basic colour of the pamphlet was intended to resemble saffron, the holy Hindu colour, but ultimately turned out to be a bright neon yellow; the alphabets and font are in imitation of ancient texts and mythological, and cultural references symbolic of Hindu assertion are in abundance. For instance:

- the reference to blood becoming as cold as ice;
- a reference to Shivaji, who not only fought the Muslims to safeguard Hindu interests and establish one of the few Hindu states in Indian history, but also killed Afzal Khan; and
- the reminder to Hindus to wear the saffron headband as an exhortation of their *dharma* to re-establish the *rta* (cosmic order);<sup>5</sup>
- allusions to the son of Kaushaliya, Lord Rama, an ideal man and reincarnated god who fulfilled his own *dharma* on earth; and
- allusions to the ultimate death of Ravana, symbolic of all persecutors of good and the final resolve to build the Ram temple in Ayodhya where the former Babri Masjid stood.

The close interweaving of format, colour, allusions, imagery and references to religious–cultural and metaphysical symbolisms combine together and contribute towards an avalanche on the senses, creating group identity and leading to a willing lapse of the individual rational faculty and the self-perception of oneself as a unit of a larger pre-ordained Hindu destiny aimed at safeguarding Hindu interests. Taunting references to the Hindu blood becoming cold as ice, Hindu hands bereft of power, idealizing Hindus as those being born of lionesses and the slaying of *asuras* (demons) like Ravana—are all aimed at the subtle insinuation that Hindus are not genetically weak or powerless, but that the mildness of the Hindu, born of a cultural conditioning, can be renounced and reversed with conscious effort and through will power. We see here an example of Bankim’s theory of ‘culture’ and ‘power’ coming full circle, along with a very effective bit of communication, guaranteed to strike a strong evocative chord with the audience, especially in the rural countryside where the hold of Rama over the *bhakti* (faith) of the believers even today has to be seen to be believed. It is evident in the popularity of the recitals of *Akhand Ramayana* (unabridged and continuous recital of the Ramayana epic).

The same message of linking culture and power comes through in an adroit communication in the form of a Hindu new year card (see Figure 14.2). It depicts the face of Lord Shiva in the form of folk art. The

**Figure 14.2**  
**Hindu New Year Card**



*Source:* Collected by the authors.

depiction is made to suggest a sun image, in view of the fact that the sun has a hallowed place in Indian folk culture as a source of light, warmth

and the promoter of life. Reference needs to be made here to the spiritual-cum-physical exercises known as the *Suryanamaskar*.<sup>6</sup> Since Shiva is a tribal god, pre-Aryan in origin, the format of the card has two strips of folk art, one each at the top and bottom. Such motifs are not difficult to locate on the outer earthen walls of mud huts in the north Indian countryside even today, particularly after the house has been done up for an auspicious occasion, like, for example, a marriage or a birth ceremony.

However, most interesting for the purpose of our analysis here, is the message contained on the back of the new year card. It is a quotation attributed to Sister Nivedita, an associate of Gandhi. Loosely translated it would run as follows:

One who is not imbibed with patience and valour, is not respected by anyone. Also, one whose actions are not the result of thinking but rather the result of idle distortions, such an animal possessing two hands and feet is not respected anywhere. Our religion is the religion of the strong Hindu youth! The contemporary *zeitgeist* is the worship of power, so says a poet. We believe that the first obligation of man is to become powerful. Worship power, but that power should be under the directive of righteousness. Righteous power and righteousness is our national objective. We should model our life in such a way that our very presence should inspire adherence to truth; good conduct should flow out of our presence. One who lives his life in this way would justify his existence; there is no doubt about this.

This is one of the more explicit enunciations of the link between power and culture aimed at a direct communication with the youth.

In 1993 the Hindu nationalists published two calendar handouts significant for two different reasons. We shall refer to them separately. The first (Figure 14.3) contains the iconographical depiction of three images—one of Ram Lala (Lord Rama as a child), a chubby baby seated on the lotus flower with the model of the proposed Rama temple in Ayodhya in the background; the second one is the depiction of Krishna with the *Krishnajamnasthan*, the temple marking the birth of Krishna in continuous proximity to the mosque in Mathura, while the third one depicts Lord Shiva with the Kashi Vishwanath, temple flanked by a mosque in Varanasi.<sup>7</sup>

It appeared as if in a single significant attempt Hindutva was making an effort to solicit the support of three major segments of

**Figure 14.3**  
**Hindu Calendar Depicting Rama and Krishna**

मई 1993 जून

जुलाई अगस्त

जनवरी 1993 फरवरी

मार्च अप्रैल

सितम्बर 1993 अक्टूबर

नवम्बर दिसम्बर

○ पूर्णिमा ● अमावस्या ◆ एकादशी ○ संक्रांति

सब वर्ष संगलपय हो ।

Source: Collected by the authors.

society by espousing the causes of the Kshatriya section of Hindu society through the adoption of Ramjanambhoomi (birth place of Lord Rama) agenda, the Ahir section of Hindu society belonging to the governmental categories of OBCs through the incorporation of the Krishnajanmasthan (site of Lord Krishna's birth) agenda and the tribal segments through the depiction of Shiva. Although it is true that some tribals today claim to be pre-Aryan and therefore outside the Hindu social structure, yet the well known inclusivist tendencies of the Hindu religion evince ample scope for tribal incorporation through adroit manoeuvrings: references to Kewat, the boatman,<sup>8</sup> and so on. Of particular significance here is the fact that after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, while publicly eschewing the possibility of further demolition of mosques, it was as if in January 1993, through the iconographical depiction of the other two imbroglios, the proponents of Hindutva were seeking to reassure their two specific support bases—the Ahirs and the tribals—that their cause had not been sacrificed under the pressure of public opinion. It was tantamount to a statement that the successful (!) management of the

other two conflict points was as important to them as the one accomplished in Ayodhya. Here the pictographic communications not only said more than words ever could but also told a very different story—one which words could not convey.

The second calendar handout of 1993 (Figure 14.4) is interesting for another reason—it depicts Ganesha, to whom standard invocations are rendered before any auspicious event, Durga astride a tiger in the stance of slaying Mahishasura and the third icon is that of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. While Durga slaying the *asura* depicted physical powers born out of righteousness and the triumph of righteous power over evil, Lakshmi signified the strength of the power born of material opulence. The reverse side of the calendar handout contains a couple of quotations of Swami Vivekananda, Veer Sarvakar and Golwalkar, the first of these explicitly enunciating the need for recognizing the importance of power in the realm of culture.<sup>9</sup>

Much before 1993, however, the RSS mouthpiece *Panchjanya* had started enunciating the concept of power. The 25 August 1991 edition of *Panchjanya* ran an article by India's leading journalist Girilal Jain

**Figure 14.4**  
**Hindu Calendar Depicting Ganesha, Durga and Lakshmi**



Source: Collected by the authors.

who in the final stages of his life drew flak due to his pro-Hindutva views. The article was titled ‘Hum Shakti Ke Mahatwa Ko Bhool Gaye Hain’ (We Have Forgotten the Importance of Power). In his posthumously published work,<sup>10</sup> he even added an appendix titled ‘Combining Bhakti With Power’ (Jain 1994: 151) and termed India a ‘civilisational state’ rather than a ‘nation state’ (ibid.: 1–3; see also Kumar 1990).

Clearly, the link between ‘culture’ and ‘power’ and the need to communicate this link to the grassroots level in an indelible manner has been uppermost in the minds of Hindutva think-tanks and judging by the evidence available, in this case through ephemera analysis they have not only set themselves to it in a characteristically serious and determined manner, but have apparently succeeded in what they set out to accomplish.

And now we address ourselves to the most significant transition of artistic metaphor—the pictographic representation of Lord Rama.<sup>11</sup> It is a transition which is alien to the ethos of traditional Hindu India and, therefore, is indicative of a marked indulgence in myth making and the re-invention of tradition. The classic image of Rama is that of being accompanied by his consort, *ardhangani* (better half) Sita, who as his constant companion followed him into exile, underwent the travails of hardships and returned to Ayodhya beside her triumphant husband. For this reason the traditional form of greeting in the north Indian countryside has always been *Jai Sita Ram*. That the Hindutva forces, particularly the RSS, with emphasis on celibate brotherhood, should have even only a marginal use of Sita is only natural. Thus, early depictions of Rama, though alone, were nevertheless benign, even benevolent, in appearance (see Figure 14.5).

While he held a bow, it was more in the nature of an adornment of the Kshatriya. Even as a warrior-king, he was more a king and less a warrior. In further representations of the same, a gradual shift to the warrior aspect becomes evident. The body language becomes more aggressive, the feet firmly planted on ground as if anticipating an onslaught, the bow more firmly held and a strong arrow in the right hand. To the cache of armour on his back is added a trident and a small axe. The billowing clouds behind him are indicative of an impending Armageddon.

In a yet another depiction (Figure 14.6), clearly printed after the Ayodhya incident, the bow in his right hand is replaced by a trident

**Figure 14.5**  
**An Early Depiction of Rama**



*Source:* Collected by the authors.

and the models of both the proposed temple as well as the temporary structure get added in the left hand corner.

**Figure 14.6**  
**A Depiction of Rama after the Ayodhya Incident**



Source: Collected by the authors.

In a final aggressive representation (Figure 14.7), with lightning lighting up the dark sky in the background and the blowing of strong

**Figure 14.7**  
**A Recent Depiction of Rama**



*Source:* Collected by the authors.

winds evident in the wind blown saffron rainments and the choppy waters at his feet, the transition of Maryadapurshottam Rama to the warrior status is complete.<sup>12</sup>

The inscription line below declares, 'I Shall Slay The Demons'. It does not require a very extensive stretch of imagination to comprehend who the alluded demons might be. The final representation of Rama, derived from the painting of Raja Ravi Verma, is certainly not Indian in style (Kapur 1989). The transcendental has finally given way to the transactional.

In the next two representations, we have the depiction of *Akhand Bharat* (Unified India), a hoary Hindutva dream along with representations of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). The first, a table memento in fluorescent plastic, features the western frontiers of unified India and the second, again a greeting card, features its eastern borders.

The depiction of Mother India (see Figure 14.8), a masterstroke at communication, attempts to connect with a particular catchment area of Hindutva—the alienated middle-class youth from traditional backgrounds in mofussil areas. One only needs to remember Stanley Wolpert's (1991: 77–78) words to comprehend the extent of appeal: 'The mother goddess is earth incarnate. She is the field in which every seed must be sown to live and grow. She embodies the creative, unmatched *Shakti* (Energy) of the life force itself.'

Without his consort mother goddess, no Hindu god is of much use or value to anyone. He may strut about, but his powers are limited. To be complete, he requires a *devi*, a goddess, who takes many different names and forms, but always embodies *Shakti*. Hindu devotion to the mother is both ancient and modern, for no relationship is stronger in a Hindu family to this day than that which binds sons to mothers.

Mother worship is often hailed in poetry and song, as well as in temples and household. India's first national anthem ('Mother, I bow to thee'), was originally a Bengali poem in a popular nineteenth-century novel by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1839–94), which inspired millions of young Bengali Hindus to court prison and risk death in the first wave of anti-partition boycott and violent agitation (ibid.: 79). Add to this the glowing iridescent outline of *Akhand Bharat* visible to the Hindu youth just before he falls asleep, and the potency of the communication technique becomes evident.

**Figure 14.8**  
**Mother India**



*Source:* Collected by the authors.

In the course of a visit to an RSS annual camp in Wardha in 1934, Gandhi came across the pictorial depictions and photographs of Rama, Krishna, Shivaji, Guru Govind Singh and other, and enquired if the RSS accepted Shiva and Ganesha as gods. The reply was that

they displayed the icons of and promoted respect for the ‘heroes’, not gods. Much water has flown down the Ganges and Hindutva has since then come to recognize, to their advantage, that in the fertile ground of Hindu culture the line of demarcation between heroes and gods is a very ambivalent and indistinct one. With the creation of myths and the re-invention of tradition, it is possible for any hero to be deified just as it is scripturally possible for any god to reincarnate and enter the world of heroes. If Krishna’s promise in the Bhagvad Gita to return as a reincarnate in the eras to come can be taken seriously,<sup>13</sup> then reverse traffic is surely possible. Nowhere is this deification of heroes more evident than in the Hindutva camp. New heroes are constantly being added to the status of gods, while gods are now being freely used for communication and mobilization, in a search for power as we have just seen. On a visit to a massive VHP temple in Haridwar, the authors witnessed this phenomena more clearly than ever before. On one floor of the temple were installed statues of the mother goddess, another floor was devoted to the various *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu and so forth, until suddenly, on one floor one found oneself gazing at Hindu heroes of the national movement and finally at the statues of Hedgewar and Golwalkar.<sup>14</sup> This unabashed process of deification continues unabated.

For example, on a new year card (Figure 14.9) the depiction of Rama over the model of the proposed temple in Ayodhya is flanked

**Figure 14.9**  
New Year Card with Rama (Centre), Hedgewar (Left)  
and King Vikramaditya (Right)



Source: Collected by the authors.

by a photographic representation of Hedgewar on one side and a artistic rendering of King Vikramaditya on the other, both being Hindu heroes rather than gods. Critics, both in India and abroad, have often wondered how some Indian intellectuals could be so compromised as to find nothing embarrassing about providing the Hindutva agenda with covert support. In reviewing widespread communal riots, academics and journalists have sought to analyze how a wider social consensus for violence is framed.<sup>15</sup>

The answer to the enigma lies in the fact that while most Hindus, intellectuals included, would not mind accepting a particular character as a cultural hero. The character could, after that initial round of acceptance, be metamorphosed into a deity for the safeguarding of whose honour subtle and not so subtle evocations to violence could follow. The entire exercise is manifest in a smooth operation and it is here that the liberal Hindu psyche feels affronted (alas, too late?). The total exercise in communication through cultural symbols with the intent of manipulating power turns a full circle.

The first step towards the quest for power through the re-invention, evocation and manipulation of cultural symbols, therefore, is the creation of a new group identity along with an articulation of dormant, yet existent and often strongly felt, Hindu sentiments and grievances. This stage of identity formation is marked with simultaneous creation as well as articulation, projection and representation of a collective Hindu identity. The speeches of rabble-rousers would inevitably contain allusions to Hindu religious texts along with imagery drawn from them, directed specifically to the target groups concerned or the objectives sought to be achieved. For instance, references to Kewat the boatman, who rowed Rama across the river on his departure from Ayodhya; references to Shabri's *bers* (berries) offered to Rama in a spurt of love and *bhakti* would be enunciated for the purpose of Dalit incorporation into the Hindu fold (Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi 1996b); references to Mother India and Sita would be inevitable in addresses to women's groups; references to Sikh gurus would not be missed in addresses delivered in Punjab; references to *amar shaheed* (martyr) *kar sevaks* would be made in addresses to adolescent groups, and so on. The references are chosen in a manner so that they serve as markers of the boundaries of this new-found Hindu identity, bolster it and generate cohesion. The cascading of these references and metaphors produce

a kind of morphogenic resonance in the collective psyche, leading to a willing suspension of disbelief until the surfeit of theological and cultural references, metaphors and imagery combine together with appeals to the group identity and produce a jumble which becomes irresistible for the audience. The potency of these allusions lie precisely in the fact that they are drawn from the cultural milieu of the Hindu community. This accounts for the speedy ascent of Hindutva in the political arena, an ascent that in journalistic parlance has in the past been termed as the '*Ram lahar*' ('Rama wave').

Occasionally, perceived or real, internal or external, threats to the newly-formed Hindu group identity invite the attention of Hindutva ideologues and are addressed as such. But let us first consider the perceived/real 'internal' threat. In a famous and memorable speech, made popular through the circulation of audio-cassettes, after the first attempt at the demolition of the Babri Mosque, was effectively thwarted, Sadhvi Rithambra exhorted: 'Even an owl can see in the dark but this son of an owl (*ullu ka patha*: a term of raucous rural colloquial abuse) Mulayam Singh (then chief minister of UP) refuses to see reason by night or by day.'

The internal threat is also perceived in the persona of 'secularists' and liberal Hindu intellectuals who are viewed as 'the enemy within', for whom once again a mythological reference to Vibhishan is reserved: '*Ghar ka bhedi Lanka dhaye*' (The informer within, the fifth column, is responsible for the collapse of Ravana's kingdom, Lanka). The fragmenting, challenging, uncomfortable and difficult-to-explain tendencies are combined for a greater integration of Hindu identity. This also explains the acceptance and use of certain symbolisms to the exclusions of others, as, for example, the acceptance of Sita rather than the Draupadi model for Hindu womanhood. The enemy outside is, of course, always the Muslim—the 'other'—and sometimes the Christian missionaries (*ibid.*).

In the assiduous build up of the Muslim 'other' to legendary proportions, the tendency for vilification and scapegoating, a handy instrument in the construction of a cohesive Hindu identity, becomes evident. This is accompanied by a parallel and converse attempt to lionize the Hindu by emphasizing the Hindu eclectic sense of tolerance, creativity, compassion, forgiveness, inclusiveness and universalistic

concern. The Orientalist constructs are once again selectively evoked when convenient, while at other times they are perceived and projected as an embarrassment or a weakness,<sup>16</sup> hence the need to semitize Hinduism or canonize it.

Nevertheless, their evocation invariably succeeds in conferring on the newly created Hindu identity collectively a sense of purity, grandeur and selflessness, ultimately contributing towards raising the collective self-esteem of the Hindu collective as, for example, a sticker proclaiming 6 December as 'Hindu Victory Day'. Since victory inevitably implies a vanquished, the proclamation on the stickers serves to bolster the collective Hindu esteem (see Figure 14.10).

**Figure 14.10**  
**A Sticker Proclaiming 6 December as 'Hindu Victory Day'**



*Source:* Collected by the authors.

The resort to the bardic form of narration while evoking Hindu cultural symbolism is another effective communication technique employed by the forces of Hindutva in its quest for power. The mobilization effected by the Hindutva has been replete with couplets recited in bardic style. At the height of the Ayodhya movement(s) enthused children went about parroting the lines: '*Baccha bacccha Ram ka, Janambhoomi ke kam ka*' (Every child belongs to Rama and is of use to the cause of the Janambhoomi), while another slogan rang: '*Ye yachna nahi ab rana hoga, sangram maha bhishan hoga*' (This is not a plea but a call to the arms, the Armageddon will be terrible). Most of these slogans were available as stickers. In a country where traditional knowledge has been transmitted through '*shruti*' and '*smriti*' (the twin processes of oral transmission) down the ages, where oral traditions have abounded (Kabir, the Allha-Udal ballads, the recitals of Tulsi Ramayana, and so on and so forth), where cultural continuities have become interwoven with religious traditions, where bardic narration forms have been used to define structural positions, this method of

communication has a direct impact on the consciousness of the people, particularly in rural areas where this has a very real potency.

The newly created feelings of collective identity have often been bolstered by a conglomeration of fact and fiction. Consequently the myth-making industry flourishes. One recent study of the processes of mythification in Ayodhya, which attempts to understand why myths convince people, why they circulate and why they play on popular imagination, has assiduously attempted to trace the evolution of the birth and life-cycle of myths (Bhattacharya 1991).

It involves, first, attempts to semitize the religion in order to generate a cohesive group identity. The group then adopts certain new rituals and practices, the performance of which binds the community and distinguishes it from the other groups. Occasionally group mobilizations are undertaken, which in the case of Hindutva often become rituals involving the *kar seva*, *rath yatra*, *ekatmata yajña*, *mashal jaloos*, *asthi kalash yatra*, *Ramshila puja* and *Ram jyoti*—all demonstrations of the Hindu power<sup>17</sup> in which the sacred reveals itself through the extraordinary, the mysterious and the miraculous. Inherent in the circulation of myths is the effort to legitimize the present action by the construction of a mythical sacred history. Myths are thus instrumental in the authorization of current actions inasmuch as the present is seen not as something new, but rather a continuation of the preceding actions of the forefathers. Myths appeal because they appear familiar; they appear to be a part of the known and accepted tradition. Yet the stories within the traditional mythic forms have large elements of the unreal. They enter tradition at a given moment in time, get interwoven with known and recognizable historical evidences, undergo a process of familiarization and concretization and finally come to have the power of facts, at least in the minds of the believers.

Such academic hair-splitting, however, is the prerogative of the analyst. The average believer is not interested in the proof or veracity of historical facts. He/she is only interested in viewing himself/herself as a crucial part of a Hindu destiny as it re-affirms his/her self-esteem. He/she wants to believe the myths, submit himself/herself to imaginative abandon and this accounts for the communicative powers of the myths and legends (van der Veer 1989: 11–14).

Often the analysis of the Hindutva ephemera—the slogans, the graffiti (*bhiti-lekh*), ditties and stickers—reveal appeals to acute and regretful feelings of a collective Hindu loss. This process of collective mourning follows a significant parallel and emerges as a counterpart to the individual experiences of mourning, except that it is preceded first by a resort to universalization of the Hindu religio-cultural feelings of loss.

It then follows a close parallel to the individual processes and stages of grieving which includes reminders of the obligations of the living towards the dead. By assigning cultural meaning to the sense of loss built up through cultural references to collective cultural humiliations and promoting this collective consciousness of loss it appeals to the present and therefore surviving generation of Hindus who come to bear a sense of guilt and shame at their inability to uphold *dharma* and perceive a failure in not fulfilling their obligation to the martyrs. These feelings of inadequacy are further stoked through invocations of the failure to take revenge and deliver retribution.<sup>18</sup> The entire exercise is couched in an adroit martyrological discourse combining the sacred and the profane and firmly binds the target audience and sometimes even makes it possible for the group to be mobilized for political violence (Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi 1996a).

Finally, the persona of the sloganeers, rabble-rousers and exhortationists contribute towards the conjuring up of the images of renunciates. The entire VHP segment, Sadhvi Rithambra, Uma Bharti, the late Swami Vamdev, Swami Sureshanand, Sakshi Maharaj, Swami Chinmayanand, all clad in saffron, evoke an imagery of expansive selflessness, forgiveness and good-natured Hindu tolerance, goaded to a point beyond endurance in the tradition of ancient sages and the gods. The persona of the RSS top brass, all celibates and renunciates fashioned in the image of the Bhagvad Gita tradition of the *karmyogi* (one who seeks salvation through devotion to the dispassionate performance of the duty flowing out of his station in life rather than through solitary spiritual pursuits and worldly withdrawal), have much the same impact on the target group. It effectively camouflages the harsh reality of politicians, mobilized on grounds of electoral or egoistic considerations and creates an overarching impression of benign universalistic welfare motives coupled with righteous retaliation.

## Conclusion

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In the final analysis, this essay seeks to establish that the ephemera of Hindu nationalists, drawn up in the context of factual and mythical aspects of Hindu culture, serves as a potent means of communication with the north Indian Hindu multitudes, particularly in the countryside, and in turn serves to enhance the power of rightist Hindu forces. The culture-specificity of these messages and appeals become evident in the presentation format of the ephemera, which is in simulation of the format of Hindu religious texts, in the expedient use of saffron colour, the holy colour of the Hindus, in the use of culture-specific symbolisms and metaphors, in the references to historical epochs indicative of Hindu glory, by resort to myth-making, through appeals to Hindu conscience and psyche and finally through exhortation to the Hindu *dharma* of preserving *rta* as an obligation of a Hindu towards future progeny.

This study has sought to prove that Hindutva's basic premises concerning culture and power closely follow Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's philosophical premises in which the Hindu's political subjugation is viewed not in terms of physical weakness, but in terms of culture. The Orientalist constructs concerning the mildness and the gentleness of the Hindu trampled upon through centuries by aggressors are attributed not to material conditions but to cultural conditioning and since any conditioning can, with awareness and effort, be deconstructed and reversed the case of the Hindu is no exception. The Hindu's present cultural conditioning can, therefore, be replaced by a more assertive, perhaps even aggressive, cultural conditioning and response. In other words, the Hindu's return to the 'culture of power' is recommended. Further, the communication techniques through the ephemera become more finely honed and we witness an alternating and expedient use of Orientalist and post-Orientalist constructs. Images of the gentle Hindu, receiving drubbings at the hands of marauding hordes are built up to evoke group narcissistic rage, while at the same time make a parallel attempt to create feelings of collective narcissistic self-love through the creation of the grandiose Hindu self by referring to the creativity, the eclectic and universalistic features of Hindu culture, while sentiments of collective resentment towards Semitic religions are invoked along with attempts to semitize Hinduism.

In communicating the new message of 'power' to the Hindu multitudes, frequent use is made of the iconographical renderings of religious-cultural symbols of power and historical heroes representing the zenith of Hindu power. The pictographic representation of Durga is used to suggest physical power, Lakshmi is used to signify material power, Shivaji is used to suggest Hindu power in a historical context, and so on. Messages denoting the concept of Hindu power are freely used on greeting cards. Enunciations of the concept in Hindutva magazines, books, slogans, pamphlets, stickers and cards are easy to come by. The most significant as well as apparent iconographical transition to power has been the image of Rama, which signifies the most effective visual communication of the transition from the transcendental to the transactional. In fact at one point of time, towards the beginning of 1993, not only did the pictographs of the Hindutva calendar handouts expressed more than the text and declarations but went beyond and contradicted verbal declarations. While the BJP tactically watered down its public stand on the mosques of Mathura and Varanasi, the pictographic representations continued to assert their claims. In its verbal and visual communications, they inundated the audience with culture-specific metaphors, imagery, examples and references until the individual consciousness, awash with the appeals, would move towards a willing lapse of the rational self. The individual self would then be transcended to a state of expansive acceptance of similar others; in short, the individual would allow himself/herself to become a part of a crowd willing to be mobilized.

As with their other activities, so also with their ephemera, Hindutva strives to create a group identity of the Hindus, marking the external boundaries of the collectivity to include specific segments of Hindu society, warding off internal and external threats to the newly formed collective, building greater cohesiveness through new-found rituals, minimizing and sometimes attacking fragmenting tendencies and assiduously building up the 'other' while lionizing the Hindu to evoke his grandiose self, born of self-love. Allusions to collective losses are made to evoke narcissist rage, paving the way for violent mobilizations. The martyrological discourse runs deep and a process of deification of cultural heroes continues.

In Western cultural norms emotional attachment of the son to the mother is labelled in Freudian terms; in India it has a very different culture-specific connotation: Hindutva utilizes this bond as a means of communication by invoking the individual's attachment to Mother India. The accompanying imagery is one of life-generating power or *Shakti*. Glowing iridescent mementoes of *Akhand Bharat* lighting up the corner of the room serve as a potent motivational factor for the Hindu youth before he drifts into sleep.

The bardic narrative form of communication in consonance with the culture of north India is adopted even as the myth-making industry flourishes and the persona of the speakers serves to create an ambience of renunciation, effectively camouflaging the stark quest for power.

## Notes

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1. Jayati Chaturvedi's lecture to students of National University, Cordoba, Argentina, 29 April 1996, and radio interview in the National University, Catamarca, Argentina, 6 May 1996, on aspects of Indian polity in pre-election review. Also see Ahmed (1993); Bremen (1993); Chaturvedi (1996); Gould (1993); *New York Times* (1996); Rozenthal (1996).
2. For an erudite work on the RSS, see Anderson and Damle (1987).
3. References to his philosophy in this piece are based on Chatterjee (1986: 67–91).
4. The RSS *boudhiki* (intellectual grooming) of the north Indian *swayamsevaks* includes the mandatory recommendation of a handbook titled '*Ekatmatastotra* (Integral Incantations), which contains the names of the 'heroes' of the Hindutva pantheon. Bankim's name is conspicuous by its absence. Yet the entire RSS organizational set-up is along the lines imagined by Bankim in his *Anandmath* with a nomenclature variable: while the fighting monks in the *Anandmath* are called *santaan* (children of Mother India), the RSS celibates are called *pracharaks* (propagandists).
5. The word *dharma* comes from the Sanskrit root *dhr* meaning 'to hold'. *Dharma* is that which holds a society together. Since the Hindus thought a society was held together by each individual or group doing their specific duties, they used the term to mean duties, religious and secular. In Hindu thought the universe is perceived as a ordered whole governed by fixed laws. It is characterised by *rta*, the inviolable order of things. Society replicates the order of the universe and is held together by *dharma* (see Parekh 1986).
6. Literally, 'salutation to the sun'; specifically, a set of exercises to be performed

in conjunction with the first rays of the rising sun while internally reciting the accompanying *mantras* (incantations). The entire exercise is typical to hardcore traditional north Indian Hindus and is central to the concept of maintenance of good health and physical grooming.

7. For a succinct explanation of Shiva and related symbolisms, see Wolpert (1991).
8. Lord Rama, on being exiled, from Ayodhya for fourteen years, reached the banks of the Saryu River. He stood there and wondered how he would cross the river. A boatman (low-caste-*mallah*) offered his services and rowed Rama, his wife Sita and his brother Lakshman across the river. Kewat refused to accept payment. He had already been blessed by the opportunity to serve Rama. Rama then embraced Kewat. This incident is from the Ramayana itself and is cited by modern day Hindu nationalists to illustrate the functional role, rather than the social relevance, of the caste system.
9. This quotation claiming to be from Vivekananda (context not given), translated runs thus: 'In *Dharma* alone lies hidden the power of Bharat and as long as the Hindu remembers the honourable traditions of his forefathers, no power in the world can destroy him.'
10. It was viewed by Kushwant Singh as 'a clear anti-Muslim stance' in *India Today*, 31 August 1994. A seminar was held to discuss the work on 27 July 1994 at the India International Centre, Delhi and was attended by L.K Advani, Syed Shahabuddin, Ashis Nandy, Dilip Padgaonkar, Vasant Sathe and other luminaries.
11. Some of the preceding material was first used by the authors at a lecture in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, 14 November 1991.
12. Refer to two books by Limaye (1987a, 1987b).
13. Chapter 4, verses 7 and 8.
14. This is the well known Bharatmata Mandir in Haridwar. A VHP-supported temple, it is headed by a fluent English-speaking monk, Swami Satyamitrnananji Maharaj.
15. The authors attended two such academic exercises. One was a seminar held in Haryana Bhavan, New Delhi, 13–14 August 1994. The contributions of the authors is contained in a publication growing out of the seminar in (Bhargava and Umashanker 1995: 77–92). The other was an international seminar, 'The Muse and the Minorities: Social Concerns and Creative Cohesion' at the India International Centre, New Delhi, 20–22 September 1996.
16. Espousers of the Hindu cause seem to be fairly well acquainted with the opemons of the post-Orientalists like those of Ainslee Embree, Ronald Inden, Peter van der Veer and T.N. Madan. References to Inden's work are often seen in the writings of Girilal Jain.

17. These are the new rituals used for cementing the new Hindu identity. These were taken up for consideration by the authors in a paper presented at an international conference on religion, identity and politics (Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi 1991).
18. For more on feelings of revenge which afflict survivors in situations of extraordinary deaths, see Das (1992a and 1992b).

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# 15

## THE RITUAL MANAGEMENT OF DESIRE IN INDIAN BAZAAR ART

KAJRI JAIN

The objects I want to deal with in this chapter are pictures, but what I am concerned with is how their representational capacity is articulated with their circulation as objects. In particular, I am interested in exploring how this circulation might work to inscribe modalities of belonging or inter-subjectivity at semiotic levels other than that of representation, in ways which may or may not mesh with each other in the post-colonial public sphere (if we can call it that) in contemporary India. This might be an unfamiliar context to some, but since my argument here is partly situated around that difference *as* difference, I will start by sketching in just the barest minimum necessary background.

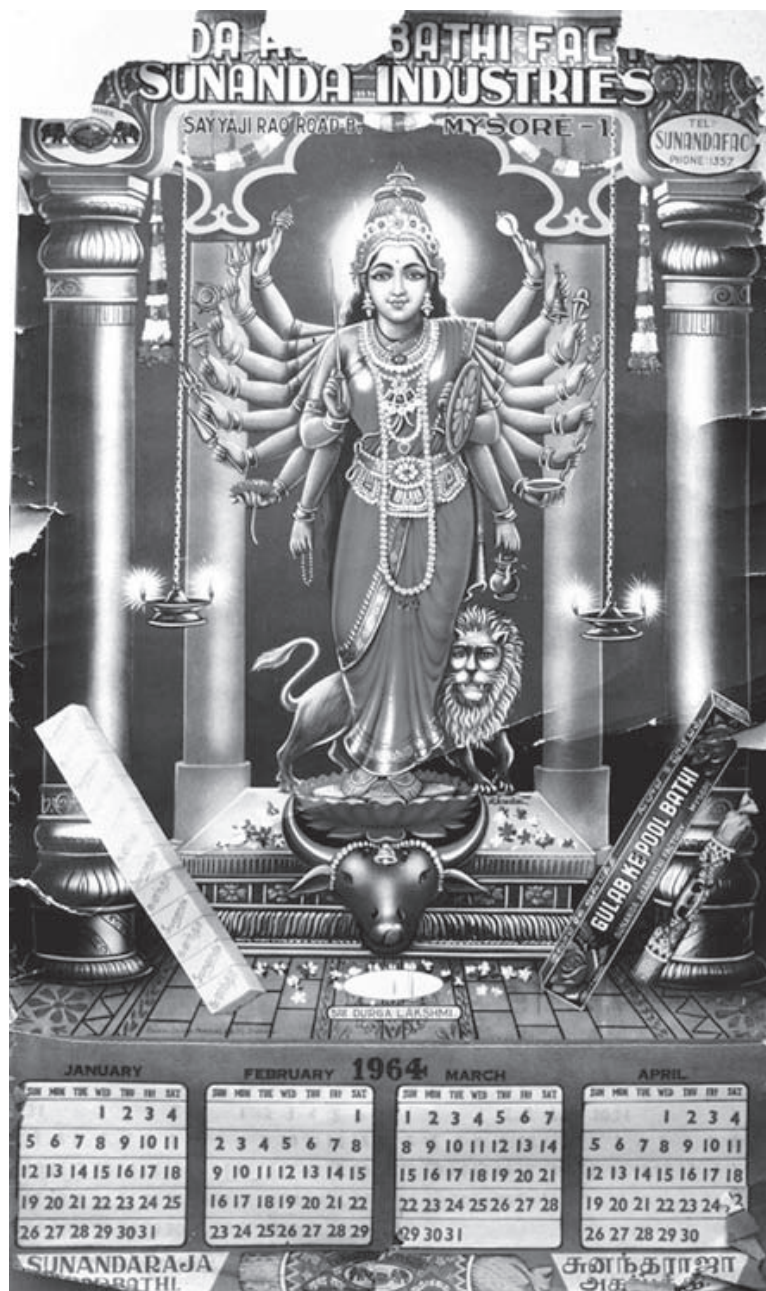
### Devotional Prints in the Bazaar

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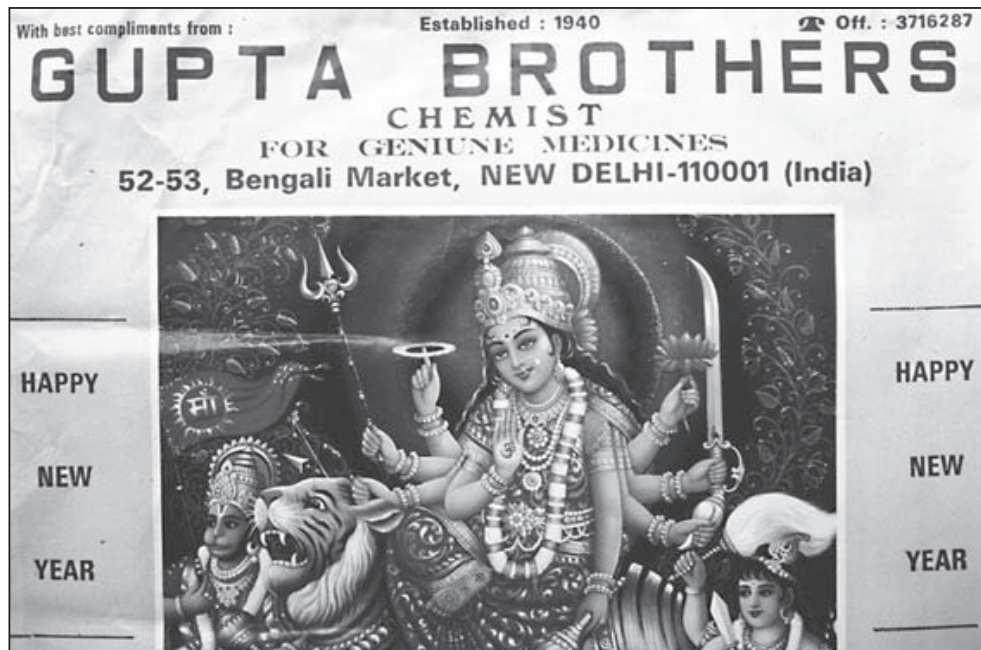
Since at least the early 1930s (when a calendar-cum-advertisement featuring a Krishna-like child was produced by the makers of Woodward's Gripe Water), companies all over India have been sending out similar calendars to their business associates and favoured customers. This happens annually, between the beginning of the Hindu financial year around November and the secular New Year. What has made the calendar such an affordable and widely used mode of publicity is the way in which printers in large production centres are able to

optimize economies of scale in four-colour offset printing, by producing catalogues of what they call ‘ready-made’ designs every year. These designs can be overprinted by local letterpresses with a company’s name in print runs as low as a couple of hundred. So while a medium-scale concern like Sunanda Industries might have a specially designed calendar, the local chemist’s shop can also hand out its own personalized ‘ready-mades’ (Figures 15.1 and 15.2).

**Figure 15.1**  
1964 Calendar Produced Exclusively for Sunanda Industries



**Figure 15.2**  
**'Ready-made' Calendar Overprinted with the Name of Gupta Brothers Chemists**



These are chosen from a variety of designs, mainly Hindu religious icons, but with an assortment of themes from other religions, as well as babies, national heroes, film stars, landscapes, animals, and so on. The ubiquity of these calendars has meant that their visual idiom has come to be known as 'calendar art' or 'bazaar art', a term that extends to include posters and what are called 'framing pictures', the smaller mass-produced icons sold since the late nineteenth century at pilgrimage sites and pavement markets or in framing shops.<sup>1</sup>

Let us stay for a minute with one calendar, produced in 1995 by the Western India Chemical Company, makers of Owamil cold and headache tablets, Santomix 'effective tablets against roundworms' and Jai *kajal* (kohl), advertised here as an indigenous ayurvedic medicine and commonly used as a cosmetic eyeliner or on children to ward off the evil eye (Figure 15.3).

The image is that of the three major Hindu gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, in their unified form as Dattatreya (literally 'three gods') and the text recounts the myth in which a woman's purity is able to triumph over their mischievous intent towards her and turn them into innocent infants, as they appear in the picture. The last paragraph puts a Vedantist spin on the story, stressing that all the different paths followed by devotees of the three gods essentially uphold religious

**Figure 15.3**  
**Western India Chemical Company Calendar**



equality and thereby its common metonym, national unity; the last sentence reads: 'Along with the congregation of devotees and all Indians, the Western India Chemical Company humbly pays homage to Dattatreya.'

One of the things that people like us tend to find interesting, if not amusing or (let's face it) exotic, about these prints, is perhaps the ease with which they make links between the sacred, commerce, scientific modernity and the nation. As we see in this example, secular and mythic time cohabit within the same frame, as the Hindu deity Dattatreya becomes a sign of national unity, the evil eye coexists with the ayurvedic and Western medicine and women appear as doctors, mothers and the mythic paragon of virtue. Similarly, in a 1908 advertisement the goddess Kali lent her image and name to a brand of cigarettes, or Hanumān the monkey-god appeared on a matchbox, as did Rama, Krishna and others. From the perspective of a morality which seeks to separate the material, technological and worldly sphere from that of the sacred as private spirituality, there is an uncomfortable intimacy between commerce and religion, not just within the pictorial frame of

these prints, but in the trajectory of what Igor Kopytoff (1986) calls their 'cultural biographies' as things. They are sold as commodities in the bazaar and as calendars they are given as gifts to shore up a network of trading and other relationships. Then, more often than not, prints depicting icons are accorded a certain ritual status and may end up being worshipped in a family prayer room, a temple or, indeed, a workplace shrine (Figure 15.4).

**Figure 15.4**  
**Family Shrine with Mass-Produced Prints, Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, 1994**



From the outset, commercially produced images of the divine have made their presence felt in India not just in 'private' spaces like the domestic kitchen or prayer room, but also at the sites of the most fundamental operations of quantification proper to mass production and commodity exchange: on packaging, where 'indigenous' consumer

goods are held together in specified amounts—matches, cigarettes or *beedis*, fireworks, incense, rice, tonics and hair oil. They also appear on the machines that produce these and other goods and the vehicles that transport them, watching over their operators and drivers, countering the risks of technology and travel, blessing the conversion of labour time into money; on the calendars where this time is marked out into the ‘homogeneous, empty’ units of bureaucratic administration alongside the parallel demarcation of the sacred time of fasts and festivals;<sup>2</sup> and just above the cash register in the shops where these goods are sold, so that the deities Lakshmi and (increasingly) Ganesha will favour the day’s business.

The kind of morality that feels uncomfortable with this border-crossing between a ‘private’ sphere of religion and the ‘public’ arena of market and state has tended to treat it as an essential attribute of an exotic other, conceived as a mirrored binary inversion of the self. This conception (like many Hindu deities) has had its malign and benevolent aspects: the civilizing mission’s denigration of ‘pagan fetishism’ on the one hand, and the Orientalist celebration of an all-pervasive spirituality as a traditional Eastern essence of the other. But what I am concerned with here is how this concept has been internalized in ‘progressive’ critiques of contemporary religiosity within India, which can’t help but echo colonial distinctions in attempting to split religion into tradition or culture—which is ‘good’—and ideology—which is ‘bad’. So I want to clarify up front that any epistemic divisions I might invoke—for instance, between different moral economies—are directed not so much towards specifying discrete ‘Indian’ and ‘Western’ selves and others, but towards specifying these as coexisting aspects of post-colonial Indian subjectivity in the present.

What I want to counterpose against both the essentialist valorization of Indian ‘spirituality’ and the bourgeois-Christian horror of the fetish is the historically specifiable emergence in the late pre-colonial period (around the eighteenth century) of a particular articulation of commercial, sacred and libidinal economies, that I will call the ethos of the bazaar. In delineating this ethos I am building on historian Chris Bayly’s (1983) account of the so-called ‘informal’ trading systems of mercantile communities in northern and western India.<sup>3</sup> These systems were able to persist alongside the formal market structure regulated by the colonial state, since mutual adaptation and coexistence were in

the interests of both sides.<sup>4</sup> The bazaar's complex and sophisticated mercantile systems combined the use of monetary forms with bills of exchange or promissory notes (in other words, instruments of credit) circulating through agents working on commission and forming long-distance networks that interfaced with global trade in all directions, through Persia, China, South-East Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and Eastern Africa.<sup>5</sup> Through the late pre-colonial and colonial periods, the trading communities developed as an increasingly mobile yet unified and successful group, able to forge a 'sense of moral community' across caste boundaries with Brahmins and ascetics on the one hand, and local rulers on the other. This intermediate alliance did not channel capital towards industrial production till the beginning of this century, and so it did not consolidate itself into an indigenous bourgeoisie, but as a moral community its ethos formed the basis for an alternative public sphere, resurfacing from time to time as a socio-political presence particularly associated with Hindu nationalism.<sup>6</sup>

Because its 'informal' dealings were not initially subject to a standardized system of legal enforcement (imagine a financial system with no centralized banks, no lawyers and no telecommunications), the bazaar economy came to rely heavily on long-distance networks of trust. Participation in the ethos would, therefore, have been crucial to, and indissociable from business success.<sup>7</sup> The key here was the merchant's creditworthiness, which depended on social, moral and religious as much as economic performance, such that the moral qualities of piety and frugality would, somewhat paradoxically, translate into wealth and status. The ethos of the merchant was an indicator of his creditworthiness as well as the grounds on which that creditworthiness was enacted: his success depended upon his performance attracting an investment, a risk, from those to whom it was addressed. Within this mercantile ethos, notions of value in the marketplace as they affected, say, moneylenders' interest rates or the conservation and mobilization of capital, were inseparable from the moral economy which dictated the circulation of goods, money, credit notes, favours, people and their reputations.<sup>8</sup> In this light, then, we can think of the buying of bazaar icons on pilgrimages, and the annual ritual of gifting calendars as part of an ongoing re-inscription of the personalized networks of trust and reciprocity associated with the functioning of the bazaar, with the auspicious nature of these images maintaining

the bazaar's moral index of piety. This auspiciousness is figured not only in their content—their religious, morally uplifting or otherwise pleasant themes—and in their form, where bright colours and general decorativeness are at a premium, but also in their very newness, seen not so much in absolute terms in the sense of radical originality, but in relation to what has gone immediately before. There is a veritable taboo among printers against repeating the previous year's designs in their catalogues, even though creating a 'new' design might only mean replacing the background on a Ganesha or Shiva, or giving Lakshmi a different coloured sari.

## Vaishnava *Bhakti* and the Discourse of Visual Desire

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So what kind of formulation of the sacred is required for moral-religious and commercial integrity to be imbricated in the way I have just described? Several of the calendar artists I have spoken to described the impact of their paintings in terms of an illusionist (or in their words, 'realistic') depiction of divine benevolence, which inspires devotional affect, pulling viewers towards the image, seducing or enchanting them, holding them rapt. Particularly lucid in articulating the icon's mediation between deity and devotee were artists who have come to commercial calendar work from a devotional painting tradition associated with the main temple of the Pushtimarg, a powerful Krishna cult spread across northern and western India. Pushtimarg's main constituency, since the late seventeenth century, has been the dominant trading communities of the bazaar sector, who over the twentieth century, entered industrial production and now control some of the largest business houses in the country. Such mercantile followers of Pushtimarg and related strands of Vishnu worship were also early investors in the indigenous culture industry from the late nineteenth century onwards, their influence extending over verbal and visual forms of print capitalism to shape an anti-colonial nationalist imaginary—bazaar prints and illustrated magazines as well as novels and plays. To this extent, then, these particular strands of devotion have informed a kind of public Hindu common sense, both at the level of popular religiosity and in the invocation of 'tradition' in the discourse of the nationalist elite.

I can only provide a very patchy and reductive account here, but part of this common sense is the Vedantist idea that the ultimate aim of the human soul is re-unification with a singular, abstract divine essence, which in the Vishnu cults is seen as a permanent state of blissful enjoyment of a kind of intuition, or vision, of the divine. In philosophical terms this is a qualified non-dualism, where even as the devotee is of the same essence as the divine there is enough of a separate consciousness for enjoyment—a case of having your divinity and eating it too.<sup>9</sup> Closely linked with this state of divine bliss is the notion of *darshan*, the sight of, or being in the presence of, the divine: it is a term employed in relation to sacred images, the guru, or, indeed, any auspicious sight—you go to the temple to ‘have’ or ‘take’ *darshan* of the deity, and it is as much about the deity seeing you, touching you with its benevolent gaze, as it is about you seeing the icon. This *visual* characterization of divine bliss enables the devotee’s yearning or desire for God to take on a highly sensual emotional charge, particularly evident in the cults of Krishna, a favourite manifestation of Vishnu, where devotees of both sexes identify with Krishna’s lover, Radha the cow shepherdess. Images are seen as essential for the emotional sustenance of the devotee: the ‘idol’ is seen as a support which the mind can use to steady itself in focusing its attention on god. The enjoyment of god’s sensual attributes in the image encourages the channelling of desires towards the divine. Here cults like Pushtimarg fundamentally depart from teachings that advocate an ascetic repression of desire, which is seen as counter-productive. To quote from a recent Pushtimarg pamphlet in English:

The desires may be compared with Hydra’s heads, which will not be destroyed, even if they are cut. Freudians [*sic*] are also inclined to this view. By killing desires they are not killed but will rise again from their ashes [...] So Vallabhacharya [who founded Pushtimarg in the early sixteenth century] has advocated his theory of Nirodha, which teaches how to sublimate desires without suppressing them.... Change their focus only and the same desires, instead of being hostile, will be friendly to you.... It prevents the mind from being attached to worldly objects and directs it towards God. (Shah 1978: 131)<sup>10</sup>

Instead of material renunciation, what is needed is the practice of mental discipline, *nirodha*.<sup>11</sup> Through the practice of *nirodha*, then, one begins to see property and wealth as transient, belonging if anything to

God, and to experience all desire as the desire for God. Correspondingly, Pushtimarg harnesses the desire of its devotees to the worship of Krishna through an extraordinary emphasis on images—remember, its main temple has a community of painters attached to it. The temple conducts lavish rituals, where the idol is dressed, bathed, fed and entertained in accordance with the time of day and the season; in other words, treated as though it were a living, albeit extremely pampered, 7-year-old boy. Nothing if not the classic fetish, a source of productive anxiety for both Marx (1976: 164–65)—‘the products of the human brain appear[ing] as autonomous figures with a life of their own’—and Freud (1979: 65–66), who discussed it under the heading ‘Unsuitable Substitutes for the Sexual Object’.

To the extent that any image, whether mass-produced, like the bazaar prints, or of miraculous origin, like the temple idols, is the site of a libidinal investment through ritual worship and is treated as though it had value in and of itself. This brings us to the heart of the matter: the way in which what is and isn’t recognized as a legitimate source of value has ramifications for the modalities of subjecthood that inform the post-colonial psycho-social, economic and political field. On the one hand there is the ethos of the bazaar, and on the other what we might broadly call the colonial public sphere, and the liberal-bourgeois subjectivity inscribed by missionary activity and colonial governmentality (here, again, I must emphasize that this relates to a specific time and place, and, therefore, cannot be conflated with some kind of generalized ‘Western’ or ‘Euro-American culture’, least of all contemporary Western culture). These are, of course, ideal-typical formulations that have never existed in any kind of pure form, so any attempt to specify them has to be seen as a step towards specifying the terms of an ongoing, complex, messy negotiation between these (and no doubt other) modalities, as the post-colonial field rehearses various forms of intimacy with global or ‘disorganized’ capital,<sup>12</sup> which, as we are witnessing, isn’t terribly fussy as to the regimes under which its axiomatic unfolds.

I am not primarily concerned here with the analysis of fetishism and its functions—whether in Christian dogma, Marx or Freud. What I am more interested in is the ethical commonality in the *denigration* of fetishism by these analyses, and the way in which the fetish, as an idea specific to the bourgeois public sphere, has circulated (at a certain

moment) in the discourses of anthropology, art, religion, psychoanalysis and political economy to uphold the structural integrity of the Euro-American *bourgeois socius*. In particular, I want to emphasize the way in which the fetish, as a value-laden, animated, libidinalized object, has threatened a specifically liberal-bourgeois subject and its sovereignty. The problem is not so much that the animation of objects irrationally points to the work of some supernatural agency, but that it *substitutes* for the productive, and indeed reproductive, human subject. To this extent the denigration of the fetish and the valorization of sovereignty are two sides of the same 'blind spot' of bourgeois subjectivity: that is, the disavowal of the way in which the value inhering in and created by the individual subject is inextricable from the transactional and transformational networks by which it is constituted, even as it constitutes them. So the notion of the fetish works to uphold a symbolic universe constantly threatened by the dissolution of the subject across a libidinal field of bodies and intensities.

I want to suggest that while the *bourgeois socius* has tended to abhor fetishistic desire as a threat to its integrity, the kind of 'Hindu' *socius* inscribed by what I am calling the ethos of the bazaar works to harness the libidinal intensities of the fetish to the maintenance of the *socius*. In doing so it is able to make linkages with capital in a manner that does not share the ethical anxieties around commerce, property, sovereignty, individual and community that characterize liberal thought.

In his study of the morality of transactions involving priests in the holy Indian city of Banaras, anthropologist Jonathan Parry observes that here commerce and the marketplace are not regarded as a realm of moral peril, in contrast to the attitude towards the merchant or usurer in Aristotle and then in medieval Christianity, where money is seen as inherently evil and polluting, and there is an intense suspicion of 'unnatural' sources of value (Parry 1989: 85–86). On this basis, Parry argues for a distinction between two kinds of moral economies. On one hand are those that uphold an autarchic ideal of self-sufficiency, where production, seen as the 'natural' source of value, is for the direct use or benefit of the producer. The mistrust of commerce here has more to do with the valorization of self-sufficiency than the denigration of exchange as such. This is counterposed to those moral economies which see exchange as the very foundation of society and de-link production from such notions of self-sufficiency—as with the inter-dependent division of labour in 'Hindu society' on the basis of caste.

In this second type of system, where I might place the ethos of the bazaar, exchange itself is the source of value, and is seen as ‘naturally’ productive due to the socio-moral imperative that exchanges (of both gifts and commodities) must attract increasing returns, and thus maintains reciprocal flows. For instance, the gifting of a calendar/advertisement raises the stakes in what might have otherwise been a straightforward commodity transaction, where any need for continuing the relationship between the buyer and the seller of *Jai Kajal* or Santomix is annulled by the equality of exchange inherent in a fair price. To this extent the name of the company, printed to generate publicity, could be seen as that embodiment of the donor which (in the Maussian reading) comprises the spirit of the gift.<sup>13</sup> In this system, then, the generation of value is not located in a sovereign productive body, whether it is the labouring individual, the corporation or the nation. The blind spot here, its locus of disavowal, is the role of singular, finite bodies in value production: thus, the denigration of the so-called ‘untouchable’ lower castes through their association with manual work, ritually polluted carcasses and bodily wastes. Similarly, the bodies of women have also posed a threat to the social order. In calendar art this blind spot with respect to the location of value and agency in the labouring body has been manifested, until recently, as a general rule against painting the gods with muscles (which is often frustrating for the artists, keen to display their grasp of anatomy). All power is divine and located in the still centre of divine will, not the muscular, active body: the point of giving the gods a human form is to inspire affect, of which the main locus is not the body, but the face and eyes.

## The Performative Interface between Sacred and Commercial Value

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Parry’s distinction between *moral* economies helps us see how an ethos of self-sufficiency and the sovereign productive body persists in the liberal formulation of the subject, even as bourgeois political economy seeks to overcome feudalism’s valorization of agricultural production and antipathy to mercantilism.<sup>14</sup> Political economy maintains an investment in a rational, self-interested, utilizing or labouring body; indeed, Jean Baudrillard (1975, 1981: 89) accuses Marx of perpetuating

precisely this aspect of political economy in what he sees as Marx's fetishization of production.<sup>15</sup> But Baudrillard's critique, both of Marx and of capitalism, is based on an even more radical utopia than unalienated labour: the primitivist fantasy of what he calls symbolic exchange, where Bataillean notions of waste, loss, sacrifice and excess are opposed to production, value and an exploitative accumulation of power. What he does not account for is the way in which such excessive forms might be harnessed, as it seems to me they are in the ethos of the bazaar, to *generate* value via a libidinal economy of the sacred which is inseparable from, and inter-convertible with, value in political economy. In this respect he is uninterested in addressing the way in which the axiomatic of capital<sup>16</sup> is able to make linkages with other systems that are not simple inversions of bourgeois society. Presumably, they all eventually succumb to what in Baudrillard's semiological reworking of Marx is the fetishism of the code.

But even as this might be the case, I want to suggest that it could be useful to specify the different ethical and political modalities that might be involved in making linkages with capital. The encounters between these modalities in the post-colonial context can work to articulate and strengthen the power formations within which they operate, but they can also exacerbate each other's inherent tensions and contradictions. The mechanics—or, to reach into Deleuze and Guattari's toolkit—the 'machinics' of this process pushes us to think beyond Baudrillard's preoccupation with the signifier, to the way in which signs have to be re-materialized at the level of bodies in order to become efficacious in order to constantly re-institute their transcendent, virtual codings.<sup>17</sup>

A key notion in the bazaar's devotional system is that of incarnation or manifestation, whereby different objects and bodies are able to incarnate the divine essence on a sliding qualitative scale; indeed, a sliding scale of value. So, for instance, while the Krishna idol of Pushtimarg and the picture of Dattatreya on the chemical company's calendar are both incarnations of the divine, the Pushtimarg idol has a far greater value and greater powers than the calendar. What generates and maintains this value is ritual worship by priests and lay devotees, which you could think of as a kind of labour. But this is not the kind of labour that is grounded in ideas of harnessing nature or catering to utilitarian needs. What is being farmed and channelled here is affective intensity, or, if you like, fetishistic desire, which is managed at

an inter-subjective level through its harnessing to cyclic pulsations in time: the essence of ritual is repetition. The divine is thus instituted as a great libidinal reservoir through repeated performative investments, somewhat in the manner of money-capital. Simultaneously, however, its transcendence or virtuality is reinstated as the essence of the social, or as Brian Massumi (1992: 108–14) puts it, ‘stepped down’ to the level of bodies through the controlled exchange of ritual substance between deity and devotee. In temple, rituals fluids like water, fire or smoke transmit divine substance for physical incorporation by the worshipper. But the two essential elements present even in the simplest personal rituals are time itself, fluid *par excellence*, incorporated into the body as habit, and the gaze, often conceptualized in devotional literature as a fluid, which effects a kind of divine contagion through the ‘taking’ of *darshan*.<sup>18</sup> Visuality also becomes the basis for a mediated hyper-intensification through spectacular annual processions and community festivals, where collective desires, again subject to contagion by the visible outpouring of affect, are concentrated on specially created images which are then immersed in a river or lake: again, harnessed to the divine reservoir of desire.

Value is generated through such processes in the sacred economy, enabling a conversion of such libidinal investments into material wealth and political power. Such value extends not just to idols, religious leaders and temples, but to other iconic figures—national heroes are often seen as sacred, and several film stars have converted their screen charisma into political power. But, of course, this is not that different to the workings of so-called ‘post-industrial’ consumer capitalism: we can all relate to such notions of value generation through mass-mediated affect (I need not remind you of the Death of Diana phenomenon) or cyclic repetitions (TV serials, the fashion industry).

The difference often cited between such pre-modern or ‘traditional’ systems and the supposedly de-personalized system of capitalism’ is that the latter is not tied to a performative interpersonal ethos, but to individual acts of consumption which ‘buy into’ transcendent categories of identity. But such distinctions are rendered less clear-cut in the post-colonial field, as we have seen with our calendar, where the nation becomes an extension of a community of devotees constituted via the performativity of the marketplace. What we have instead are a series of disjunctive articulations, machinic linkages across the various semiotic,

psychic and commercial economies in which objects or bodies circulate, with repercussions both for these economies and for the bodies they inscribe and by which their networks are inscribed. I want to conclude with another briefly sketched example from calendar art which might provide some sense of how such articulations might work, and of the political stakes involved: the case of the God Rama's muscles.<sup>19</sup>

I mentioned earlier how calendar artists have complained of not being allowed to depict musculature in the gods. This rule has its exceptions, as in the case of Hanumān, the monkey-god, whose extraordinary strength is totally committed to the service of Rama. His body, as that of an animal and a servant, the paragon of devotion, poses no threat to the location of ultimate transcendent agency in the unlabouring, primarily affective body of Rama and, indeed, often Rama is actually seen embedded within the body of Hanuman, or Hanuman's body is made up of Rama's name.

By and large, Rama has been portrayed as fairly smooth and flabby, the kind of male body that Westerners are often unable to parse as attractive in Indian movie stars. This changed in the late 1980s, when depictions of a militant, muscular Rama—he is, after all, a king who triumphs in battle over the forces of evil—appeared in Hindu nationalist propaganda pushing for the destruction of a mosque that had supposedly been built on the site of his birthplace<sup>20</sup> (Figure 15.5).

**Figure 15.5**  
**Muscular Rama Featured in Hindu Absolutist Propaganda**



Ever since they first appeared, calendar prints have had a notorious history of such use in anti-Muslim and Hindu nationalist propaganda.<sup>21</sup> But the humanness of the gods in these depictions tended to be centred around their affective charge, their evocation of devotional desire, rather than an appeal to bodily agency. Now even as Rama was being depicted as muscular and powerful, his mortality was foregrounded through a preoccupation with the infant Rama and the defence of his birthplace by human Hindus. The very human power, agency and vulnerability figured in these prints indicated a certain stress along existing fault lines in the bazaar's conception of the subject, which has tended to deny such mortal agency. Bodily agency in this case was invoked in the service of identitarian violence: the Babri mosque was pulled down as the 'secular' state's forces stood by, and protests by Muslims were answered with organized attacks by Hindu mobs.

The resurgence of libidinal investment in the figure of Rama has been linked to the phenomenally successful serialization of the *Ramayana* epic on state-sponsored TV, an attempt at forging national unity that went horribly wrong.<sup>22</sup> But this does not account for what rendered such a muscular representation of Rama possible in a way that it would not have been a century earlier. This new muscularity has little to do with humans playing the role of the gods, for it is predated by a long tradition of folk performances of the *Ramayana*—and, indeed, almost a century of cinematic renditions.<sup>23</sup> I would suggest that this particular iconographic shift can be seen as an attempt to re-territorialize the foregrounding of bodily agency or force, hitherto coded as subhuman (animal and/or subservient), to a Hindu absolutist formation and its iconic structure of visual desire. In other words, it can be seen as a response in the performative realm to other processes of de-territorialization that threaten the ethical and symbolic consistency of the bazaar and its moral nexus with the state.

One such process is the liberalization of the Indian economy and its entry into trade forums such as GATT, where conditions for participation in the global marketplace include the acceptance of ideas such as intellectual property rights, which centre on liberal-bourgeois formulations of subjectivity and value.<sup>24</sup> And another part of the same process of dissolution and re-articulation of codes, or simultaneous de- and re-territorialization, has been the growing claim of the Dalits<sup>25</sup> to justice, rights and representation in the democratic process, another

identity-based claim resting on the re-situating of value and agency in the body, but with the difference that this is a minority movement. This agency of hitherto devalued bodies and subjects has been experienced by upper-caste bodies as an intolerable threat. In protest against a proposal to increase reservation of government jobs for the lower castes, upper-caste youths publicly set themselves on fire.<sup>26</sup> Seen in the context of these other formations, it becomes harder to recuperate the power of Rama's muscles to a reading that privileges the force of Hindu absolutism, for this force is nothing but an index of that other repressed muscularity, that other force, which it seeks to oppose.

To conclude, then, I hope that I have been able to demonstrate how representations are objects that circulate in and across coexisting sacred, libidinal and political economies, inscribing modes of belonging in different ways. But on the way I also hope to have pointed towards how the actualization of these economies and modes of belonging is an ongoing struggle, waged at the point where signs become efficacious at the level of bodies, and bodies become efficacious at the level of signs.

## Notes

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1. About calendar art as part of a national, post-colonial modernity and indigenous 'culture industry' based on the investment of capital in modern technologies of mass reproduction, and its bringing into a pan-national anti-colonial Indian 'public sphere' mythological and religious imagery, see Jain (1997, Unpublished).
2. Many calendars combine the Gregorian calendar with various other systems: while most carry the 'Hindu' luni-solar Vikrami calendar along with the Western calendar, the extremely popular *Kalnirnaya* calendar carries important Jain, Parsee, Sikh and Muslim dates as well. Interestingly, it does not carry a picture, but instead devotes the entire page to the dates themselves, while printed on the back of each month's calendar are recipes, stories, poems, domestic tips and other items of general interest.
3. These communities included, from the 'Bania heartland' (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Bundelkhand, Delhi and the Hindi-speaking upper Gangetic region known as 'Hindustan') the Agarwals, Marwaris and Jains; from Punjab, the Khatri and Aroras; from the Kutch, the Bhatias and from Sind, the Lohanas (or 'Multanis', as they were known in Bombay) and the Muslim Khojas and Memons who settled in Bombay along with the Bohras and Parsis. According to Bayly (1983: 370–71), through the eighteenth

century the Hindu and Jain commercial castes ‘widely displaced Gujeratis, “Multanis” and Muslims from long-distance trade, replacing them with families drawn from rural commercial communities.’ See also Ray (1984: 244).

4. I would suggest that the so-called ‘parallel economy’ (associated with the black market, government corruption and, notably, the film industry) that has persisted through the post-independence period can be seen as an extension of this culture of dealings outside legal and bureaucratic jurisdiction.
5. On the global trade interface and monetary forms, see Perlin (1983).
6. See Bayly (1983), in particular ‘Corporations, *Qasbahs* and the New Politics, 1870–1920’ (pp. 449–57).
7. Similarly, Clifford Geertz (1979) describes the Moroccan bazaar economy as one where reliable information is at a premium precisely because the quality, value and availability of commodities is not standardized.
8. See Bayly (1983), in particular Chapter 11, ‘The Merchant Family as a Business Enterprise’ (pp. 394–426).
9. The philosophy of Vedanta (literally, ‘end of the Veda’) is so-called because it is centred on the Upanishads, texts seen as the last portion of the Vedas and thought to have been composed between about 1000 and 300 BC, that is, predating the rise of Buddhism. Perhaps the most influential interpretations of the Upanishads, and particularly their distillation in the *Brahma Sutra* or *Vedanta Sutra* (as well as of other texts informing *bhakti* practice such as the Bhagvad Gita and the *Bhagvat Purana*), representing two distinct viewpoints, have been the non-dualism (*advaita*) of Shankara (eighth century AD) and the ‘qualified’ non-dualism (*visishtadvaita*) of Ramanuja (1017–37 AD). The ‘pure’ non-dualism (*shudhadvaita*) of the later Vallabha (the founder of Pushtimarg, 1479/81–1533 AD) is seen as having synthesized the tenets of Shankara and Ramanuja.
10. This is a pamphlet on Pushtimarg sold at temple bookshops, that is, it directly informs contemporary devotees’ practices.
11. Nirodh is the brand name of the first government-subsidized prophylactic to be made widely available in India as part of the state’s ‘family planning’ initiative, and so the word is now commonly synonymous with ‘condom’.
12. On this schematization of the ‘stages’ of capitalism, see Lash and Urry (1987).
13. ‘[T]o give something is to give a part of oneself [...] what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence’ (Mauss 1967: 10).
14. Thus, political historian J.G.A. Pocock (1975) identifies a central tussle in the development of a modern secular, political and historical self-consciousness, between ‘virtue’ and ‘providence’ on the one hand, and ‘corruption’, ‘commerce’ and ‘fortune’ on the other. An ethos in which men

of virtue earn the right to reap the steady benefits of divine providence or nature is confronted with fickle forms of wealth that appear and disappear as though out of nowhere, as with financial credit, emerging in the eighteenth century amid hostility and mistrust, its textual instruments bordering on fiction. On credit as fiction, see Sherman (1996).

15. For a materialist critique of semiological readings of Marx's notion of fetishism, see Pietz (1993).
16. The 'axiomatic' of capital in Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* refers to the laws of exchange and equivalence in the commodity economy. Their emphasis here is on circulation, capital as a system of metamorphoses, rather than production. See Deleuze and Guattari (1977: 261–62, 1987: 454–73).
17. Baudrillard is of little help when, for what I can only call political reasons, we want to specify differences or points of stress within this all-consuming codification to identify potentials within the system for the subversion of existing power relations and the opening up of possibilities for 'what a body can do'. This is where I find it more useful to work with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'machinic' linkages of desiring-production, which, as I understand it, allows for an inter-conversion between virtual and actual modalities while also recognizing the difference between them. As Brian Massumi (1992) explains it in his *User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'plane of transcendence' operates at a virtual or symbolic level to constitute the subject in terms of hierarchical, value-laden categories of identity revolving around a centralized image of transcendent agency: the nation, God, the phallus, money. However, 'to attribute anything approaching full causal power to a "dominant ideology" is [...] to accept the plane of transcendence too much on its own terms'. Signs alone cannot institute the grid of transcendence in the social field. This process requires a conversion to physicality, from the virtual to the actual (and vice versa), via mediation in the realm of performance, an 'infolding into habit' (ibid.: 112–14; also Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987).
18. Lawrence Babb (1981: 391) describes a 'current of sight' (*drishti ki dhar*), which courses between the devotee and the guru (seen as the living image of god) in the Radhasoami sect's discourse of visibility. This current exerts a pull on the devotee's 'inner sight', at the same time leaving particles of itself behind. Again, in a passage from the *Kularnava Tantra*, the image is seen as being 'milked': 'Just as the milk residing in the limbs of a cow comes out from the nipples of the cow, in the same way the all-pervading God appears through images. It becomes possible because of the unwavering faith, sincere meditation, and liking of the meditator' (*Kularnava Tantra*: 307, quoted in Vyas 1977: 11–12).
19. The propositions outlined here are argued more fully in the dissertation from which this paper is an offshoot (Jain 1998).

20. This iconographic shift from a 'tranquil, tender and serene god to an angry, punishing one armed with several weapons' has been sensitively traced in Kapur (1993: 74–109).

Also, note that 'Hindu nationalist' is the common euphemism for the Hindu right, a social–political–religious combine that seeks to collapse the terms 'Hindu' and 'India', thereby seeking to alienate or co-opt the Muslim population and other religious minorities: its agenda is that of re-instating Hindutva (literally 'Hinduness'). Its major constituents are the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a key player in central, state and municipal politics (in 1997 it won the largest single presence in the lower house at the centre, and was kept from power for a short while by a precarious coalition united largely on a secularist platform; it also controlled the Delhi Municipal Council, just as its regional counterpart in Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena, controlled the municipality of Mumbai), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization for the promotion of 'Hindu' religion, society and culture, funded in large part by a worldwide Hindu diaspora, and the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh (RSS), a grassroots militia and community service organization with a specially widespread local presence in the northern Hindi-speaking 'cow belt'. In the late 1980s the rallying point for the Hindu right was a call for the destruction (and replacement by a Hindu temple) of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, which they alleged had been built on the site of Rama's birthplace (*janmabhoomi*). In October 1990, BJP leader L.K. Advani led a *rath yatra* (chariot procession) from Somnath (the site of well-known medieval attacks on Hindu temples by Muslim raiders) to Ayodhya to muster support for this cause; on 6 December 1992, the Babri mosque was destroyed.

21. Chris Pinney (1997) situates these new Rama images within a longer tradition of political mobilization of mass-produced prints, arguing that contrary to the totalizing rational-bureaucratic procedures of Benedict Anderson's nationalism thesis, their visual 'print capitalism' works via a neo-traditional, 'messianic' idiom to shore up the project of the Indian nation-state.
22. On the TV *Ramayana*, which ran from January 1987 to August 1989, see Rajagopal (1994). However, even as he invokes desire as a heuristic category, Rajagopal's uncritical deployment of the notion of fetishism brings his analysis down on fairly predictable lines. For an account that situates the TV *Ramayana* within the wider narrative tradition of which this is the most popular recent manifestation, see Lutgendorf (1995).
23. Here I am in broad agreement with Chris Pinney (1997), who explicitly positions his argument (see Note 22) against those who configure Hindutva and its harnessing of new visual technologies as part of what might be seen as some kind of 'qualitatively different phase, some new condition of postmodernity in which the velocity of the figural produces a new kind of televisual politics'. Where I differ from Pinney, however, is in wanting to

specify the Rama images in terms of a qualitative change, though not of the sort he is arguing against. This change indexes a historicity but not a teleology: it is to be seen not as a reduction of the modalities of nationalism inscribed by visual print capitalism to a homogeneous 'transnational globality', but as a kind of 'structural adjustment' (as the IMF puts it) in its ongoing negotiation with the conditions of participation in that globality at the level of the market and the state.

24. The process of economic liberalization can be dated back to the Indira Gandhi regime's decision in 1980 to borrow US\$ 5 billion from the IMF, and the subsequent marketing of India at home, via (among other things) the commercialization of television, and overseas through the Festivals of India. This process was intensified as Rajiv Gandhi's minority government attempted to address a crisis in the balance of payments through its New Economic Policy (NEP), while also confronted with a nation-state threatening to fall apart in the face of an increasing number of separatist movements. After a decade of negotiations, India became a signatory to the GATT agreement of 1994 (known as the Dunkel Draft), one of the most controversial areas was that of intellectual property rights and patents.
25. 'Dalit' literally means the 'oppressed'; it is the politicized self-appellation of the so-called 'backward' castes. Here I would argue that a de-territorializing tendency began to assert itself through the 1970s, emanating from political upheavals across the country early in the decade: the repression of the Naxalite movement in Bengal, the Navnirman student uprising in Gujarat, the anti-Congress mobilization under Jaiprakash Narayan in Bihar (the political training ground for backward caste leaders of the 1990s such as Laloo Yadav), and a three-week railway workers' strike, followed by the Emergency and then the elections in which Indira Gandhi was dismissed from office.
26. This spate of self-immolations came as a response to the central government's proposed implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Committee in 1990. Significantly, these recommendations were opposed by the BJP, a stance widely interpreted as exposing their constituency's investment in caste privilege.

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## **4.2**

***Contending***

***Idioms***

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# 16

## ON THE WAY TO PAṆḌHARĪ

JITENDRA MAID AND GUY POITEVIN

I was in school in standard IV in 1981 when I first saw the pilgrims known as Vārkarīs heading en masse for Paṇḍharī to meet and worship their beloved Viṭhobā, god par excellence of the Bhakti cult in western Maharashtra, while proclaiming that ‘God is One’ and deprived of attributes and forms.<sup>1</sup> We schoolboys looked with astonishment at these people walking in great numbers while proclaiming the names of Jñānadev and Tukārām.<sup>2</sup> ‘Who are they?’ we asked. ‘If they have children like me at home, where have they possibly kept them? How sad the children must have felt to see that their parents had left them behind. Do these people have no feelings? What is there so great about this pilgrimage that they call *vārī*?’ Since childhood I was curious about *vārī* and kept turning these questions over and over in my mind about what it meant and why people joined it.

I have visited Paṇḍharpūr twelve times so far, four times with my parents, twice on school excursions and six times for research purposes. Twice I had a chance to go as a pilgrim accompanying a palanquin, a *pālkhī*, in the month of Āṣāḍh (approximately July). In July 1996 I saw the *pālkhī* of Tukārām setting off on its journey to Paṇḍharpūr and walked with it all the way from Pune as a member of the sant<sup>3</sup> Amritnath Swāmi Mahārāj *dindī* (a group of pilgrims) from the village of Dhamari (*taluka* Shirur, Pune district). In June–July of 1997 I spent three days with the *pālkhī* of Dnyaneshwar *māulī*,<sup>4</sup> and four days with the *pālkhī* of Tukārām. For ten days in 1998 and again in 1999 I shared the life

of several *dindīs*, and was privileged to interact for long hours with pilgrims, organizers, leaders, religious heads and gurus, *purohits* and *pujāris* (ministrants in charge of daily rituals) and *sevekarīs* (remunerated attendants).

I am concerned here with the pilgrims themselves, and the social and cultural scene that their religious practice displays nowadays. I limit my direct description and immediate interpretation to the *vārī* as a popular event, which mirrors significant aspects of the present state of Maharashtrian society and everyday culture.<sup>5</sup>

I try to answer the questions that have lingered in my mind since childhood, by focusing on three dimensions of the event:

1. the composite social figure and self-identification of Vārkarīs;
2. the relational and organizational infrastructure of the *vārī*; and
3. the interactive set-up in which rites, festive rituals, religious teaching and guidance are embedded.

We specifically apprehend the whole phenomenon as a subsystem of social communication, whereby various kinds of religious idioms stage intricate communicative configurations. We look at the *vārī* as a theatrical performance enacting a social representation.<sup>6</sup> The question we intend to answer is that of the interplay of intertwined and contrasted, if not conflicting, communicative processes, together with their resultant tangled pattern, which we shall attempt to qualify. We methodologically assume that what empirically exhibits itself as an imploded complex of semantic ambivalences, discrepant cultural drives and competing social pulls cannot but be construed and constructed as an integrated whole.<sup>7</sup> Thus, our single question: ‘What does the *vārī* enact, ultimately?’

## Vārkarī: A State of Distinction and Relief

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The *vārī* consists in taking on foot the road to Paṇḍharpūr and worshipping Viṭhobā on *ekādaśī* in the months of *Āṣāḍh*, Kārtikī, Māgha and Caitra, and in Kārtikī the road to Ālāndī, the place of the ‘living’ *samādhī* of Dnyaneshwar *māulī* near Pune.<sup>8</sup> The one who regularly observes the *vārī* is a Vārkarī. People from various strata

of society are seen making the *vārī*—rich and poor, Dalit<sup>9</sup> and high castes, men and women. They may belong to different professions and occupations, but actually most of them are peasants, farm labourers, agricultural labourers, craftsmen (*balutedars*), shopkeepers and traders, industrial workers, government employees, teachers, and so on. From small children to very old people, all enthusiastically participate in the *vārī*.

Two features immediately draw attention. First, the majority of women are deserted women, widows, those whose husband took a second wife and old women. They are mostly in their thirties or above. Few women are seen accompanying their husbands and very few children their parents. Among men, most have crossed the age of forty. A number of parents confide their frustrations: they came to escape for a while from family tensions and quarrels with grown-up children who are no longer ready to listen to them. They resent that children today openly disregard their expectations, turn their back on parental advice, do not attend to elderly parents properly, as expected. In short, they disagree with them in every respect, be it property management, ancient customs and religious traditions, dress and eating habits, or daily ancestral routine and discipline. The same goes for young daughters-in-law. On the whole, a majority of people attend the *vārī* with the purpose of escaping from family problems. It would not be wrong to say that the more the people in the *vārī*, the more the number of afflicted persons and Dalits in society. It remains to be seen—and this is what we query—how long and to what extent the *vārī* can assuage, though not remove, this affliction.

Second, peasants, farm labourers and *balutedars* are found to be greater in numbers in the *vārī*. The great majority of pilgrims belong to that class of common Maharashtrian people who are inseparably related to farming. On the whole, the economically, socially and educationally backward communities from rural area number much more.

The period of *vārī* lasts for one month. People walk from fifteen days to one and half months to come to Paṇḍharpūr. Only those who can afford to spend so much time attend the *vārī*. Some take leave and come for seven or eight days. Those for whom even this is not possible may walk just five steps with the *vārī*. There are families who have a tradition of observing this practice without fail; they arrange for some independent temporary transport and reach Paṇḍharpūr by

their own means. Some employees take ten days leave to participate in the *vārī*, but their numbers are scant. Traders are seen as well; they are not pilgrims but travelling vendors who come with the purpose of selling their goods.

People of varied *dharma* and caste take part, putting aside what keeps them apart. They walk merrily, dancing and singing, forgetting their own self, their inhibitions and worldly worries. It is an opportunity for escape from sorrows. All proceed with the sole aim of meeting Pāṇḍuraṅga, the familiar name of Viṭhobā. In the pilgrims' parlance, Paṇḍharī (rather than Paṇḍharpūr) is the 'Mother-house of Devotees', the 'maternal home', *māher*, of Bhakti devotees, to use the traditional language of the *sants*, the poets of the Bhakti movement. *Māher* is remembered by daughters-in-law—who have been given in marriage to an 'alien' house and separated from their own home—as a place of happiness, joy and gratification, the in-laws' house being viewed as a place of exile, pain, suffering and alienation. The meeting of Viṭhobā at Paṇḍharpūr figures in all the poems, *abhaṅgas*, grindmill songs<sup>10</sup> and spontaneous talks that relate to the *vārī* essentially as an embrace of one's mother, *māulī*. It is compared to the long-awaited visit home of a daughter-in-law at the time of specific festivals, or her return home when mental distress prompts her to flee her in-laws' house, a place of suffering and frustration, towards mother's house, a refuge of bliss and peace. It is not rare to see women devotees weeping at the feet of Viṭhobā while taking his *darśan* or embracing the Garuda pillar in front of Viṭhobā (instead of Viṭhobā himself)<sup>11</sup> as a mother and source of all solace.

Society at large recognizes a position of distinction, *sthān*, to those Vārkarīs, like women and other social sections who used to otherwise be ostracized and are commonly treated alike Dalit. A widow or a deserted woman would, as a consequence, be comparatively less harassed. Women otherwise forbidden to leave their house get an opportunity to go out under the name of god. Nobody then looks at them with suspicion even if they move around freely among men, talk, laugh and dance with them, or play games like *phugaḍī*. Old people who are disregarded at home get respect in the *vārī*. Such feelings of respect are enhanced by the practice of touching each other's feet. The sharing of tasks by the organizers, who try to give as many people as possible a role in the every day running of the *dinḍī*, gives a feeling of fitting into the

group and being depended upon; in short useful and wanted. As a rule, people bow to and place their head at the feet of people who have been to *Paṇḍharī*, irrespective of the latter's age, as a mark of particular respect for them. Those who were otherwise ridiculed and ostracized as Untouchables and refused entry into temples are honoured in the *vārī* (though serious rules of purity still continue to affect them, as we shall see later). Many heads bend before them. They sit next to each other while eating and attending *bhajan* and *kirtan*.<sup>12</sup> This behaviour is distinctively characteristic of the *vārī*, though inner attitudes of discrimination are certainly not forgotten despite official discourses, which would have us believe in a deep mental change. This appears to be one of the significant reasons of the increasing appeal that the *vārī* carries nowadays for the common man.

Many people spontaneously offer refreshments and meals to the *vārī* prompted by the belief that those who do so prosper and their wishes are fulfilled. There is also the persuasion that one would add to their credit of merits by offering meals to Vārkarīs in the belief that *Pāṇḍurāṅga* himself appears in the form of a Vārkarī. Often during meals I heard Vārkarīs telling us that a particular person had offered meals five times earlier, as the number of times he offered meals went on increasing, his condition had also improved. Some institutions, factories, political parties and rich people arrange for meals to be served to large groups of pilgrims. Vārkarīs may also get as gifts various items like mattresses, sheets, raincoats and drums.

Villages and towns on the route of the *vārī* welcome the pilgrims as best as they can. 'Bullocks of honour'<sup>13</sup> from the village are harnessed to the *pālkhī* when the latter approaches the boundary of the village territory and they reach it across to the other side of the village. The bullocks, decorated with chains of bells and covered with beautiful cloths, proceed towards the village to the accompaniment of music. Arches are built near the boundary of the village to welcome the *pālkhī*. The head of the *pālkhī* is welcomed with a shawl, coconut, plantain, refreshment, money (*dakṣinā*)<sup>14</sup> or similar offerings. The *pālkhī*'s *darśan* is taken and *ārati* is performed.<sup>15</sup> This welcome is planned by local personalities, political authorities and state officials: the *sarpanch* (elected president of the village council), the *gramsewak* (government employee, village council secretary), the *talathi* (government land records officer), *tehsildar* (chief government representative at the *taluka* level) and other

state functionaries from various government departments. In cities the mayor, Members of Legislative Assemblies and cadres of political parties, representatives of educational institutions, universities, banks, trade companies and factories, youth associations, and so on, erect a dais to greet and honour the pilgrims when they arrive.

Arrangements for tea or meals are made on behalf of an association or village or town. The *gram panchayat* (village council), municipalities and municipal corporations clean the village, town or cities, and set up welcome booths in several places. Youth associations bring teams of cymbal-players or *lezim*-players to welcome the *pālkhī*. Educational institutions arrange for the teams of their students to play cymbals or *lezim* and perform drills to welcome the *vārī*. School volunteers participate in traditional dress. Tableaux are also put up for the *vārī*. Students work as volunteers to facilitate the *darśan* of the *vārī* and *pālkhī* in the streets. Girls draw designs on the road with multicoloured powder. Women express their joy playing *phugaḍī* and other traditional dances and games.

A Vārkarī cannot be just anybody. He must abide by the rules that organize the collective life of his *dindī*, which he is not supposed to leave at will. He must know by heart the *āratī* to be said early morning; he must walk with the *dindī*. He can neither go ahead nor lag behind. He should begin taking the name of god right since his bath early morning. He must know by heart the mantra to be recited at the time of bath, at the time of eating, at the time of putting on clothes and at the time of sleeping. He must behave according to the norms. He should not sit in the vehicle. Then only he can be called a Vārkarī.

There is no particular dress for the Vārkarī. But even here some peculiarities can be seen. As most of the people who perform the *vārī* are those who are closely related to farming, their clothes are like those of any rural person in Maharashtra. Men wear a *dhoti*, pyjama, jacket, shirt, cap or turban, and women wear a 9-yard sari with a blouse. There are some who are seen wearing trousers and a shirt (men) or a 6-yard sari (women), but their numbers are very small.

Some Vārkarīs wear a string of basil or sandalwood beads, *māḷa*, around the neck to feel as close to their god as possible (Viṭṭhal is known to be fond of this string and is naturally expected to come close to those who try to resemble him). A *māḷa* or a string is a symbol of moral binding, but ‘a person, pure in mind and sweet-tongued, though not wearing a *māḷa*, is a Vārkarī [too]’, says *sant* Tukārām.<sup>16</sup>

Those who have vowed to keep wearing a string of basil, *rudrakṣa*, or sandalwood beads around their neck and commit themselves not to partake of alcohol or meat are known as *mālkarīs*. They will, moreover, observe other restrictions specified by their guru.<sup>17</sup> Though the number of *mālkarīs* is proportionally higher among people practising the *vārī*, there is no binding compulsion whatsoever for a Vārkarī to be a *mālkarī*. Still, a Vārkarī is firmly invited to become one as this confers a definitely higher distinction, a *mālkarī* being considered with particular respect. Conversely, all *mālkarīs* are not necessarily Vārkarīs. All those who take on a leading role or are recognized as perfect Vārkarīs with distinct functions, for instance those carrying the veena, the flag or the basil pot, are necessarily *mālkarīs* (see later).

A spot of black clay, *bukkā*, is made on the forehead, which is the distinctive sign of Viṭṭhal, in the same way as *bhaṇḍārā*, yellow turmeric powder, is a specific sign of Khandoba, and *kumkū*, the red sign of the goddess. Turmeric powder is symbol of prosperity and *kumkū* of good fortune. *Bukkā*, symbol of absence of all worldly desires, carries the message that a Vārkarī believes in renunciation. White vertical marks of sandalwood paste, *gopīcandan*, are also displayed on the forehead, symbolic of the standing posture of Viṭṭhal.

Three distinctive practices single out a Vārkarī and give him a distinguished ritual identity: a *gurumantra*, the *darśan* and the pilgrimage on foot.

A Vārkarī believes that there is neither knowledge nor liberation without a guru.<sup>18</sup> Those who have a guru are given a secret mantra (a sacred formula, either a short sentence or catchwords) with a *māla*. The *gurumantra* is given only to particular people, only those who are going to be true disciples. There is no harm in chanting the mantra in the presence of another person who has the same *guru*, but it is considered improper to do so before someone else.

A Vārkarī who sets out on a *vārī* first takes the *darśan* of the road: he touches the ground with his hand and then touches his head with the same hand. Actually, conscious that god stands in front of him, he bows down not to the earth, but to his god. Then he starts walking, taking this same god's *darśan* when he resumes the journey after rests or meals. Every morning he takes a similar *darśan* of the *sant's pādukā* (footprints or slippers) in the *pālkhī*. During the recitation of *Haripāṭh*,<sup>19</sup> the *darśan* of the earth, which is god, three times while turning on the spot twice is also the rule.

As far as possible, a Vārkarī avoids travelling in a vehicle. He thinks it proper to only go on foot. He believes that one step with the *vārī* is equivalent to performing one ‘sacrifice’, *yajña*. His conviction is, therefore, that riding in a vehicle amounts to committing the sin of missing the same. A *vārī* done in a vehicle is said to be a lame one. However, some people do go ahead in a vehicle out of necessity to make arrangements for the halt of the *dindī*.

The following profile of a woman Vārkarī may be considered as a typical example:

I am about 45. As I had not been sent to school, nobody ever thought about my real birth date. I was married at the age of 9 when I had not yet reached puberty. When my marriage was fixed, somebody from my in-law’s village told my parents that, ‘The Darekar family is known for beating their wives.’ My mother wanted to break the marriage, but my father said that, ‘This would be a blot on my name.’ I finally got married into the Darekar family. Their behaviour with me did not belie their reputation. My husband was a wrestler, and as such he was prohibited from having sexual relations. I was not a match for him. He was beating me like a beast. He was telling me: ‘You can stay here, I do not want to reject you. But I shall marry again.’ I had no issue. Nothing was binding me to him. I was asked to work hard by my mother-in-law, who did not give me enough to eat. I was permanently hungry. The manual work for hours at a tender age was a serious hardship. When she heard about my agonies, my mother, accompanied by men from the village, came in a bullockcart and took me back to her home. Ten days later my husband married again. My parents and brother still wanted me to join him again, as my staying with them was likely to jeopardize the marriage of my brothers and sisters.

I spent two years in Bombay with my aunt. Her husband wanted me to marry a second time, but I was averse to the idea. I came back to my mother’s. Within two years when my husband did not have a child with his second wife, people advised him: ‘Bring back your first wife.’ Some people from my mother’s village thought alike. They told me: ‘If you can produce a child for his family, your husband will accept you. There are a number of husbands with two wives.’ Following their arguments and advice, I went back to my husband. Within two months the same story started repeating: my husband beat me as much as his second wife—out of equality. My brother then came and brought me back home. A few years later I went to court but due to financial constraints, I could not pursue the case.

I started joining a group of Vārkarīs after I came back to my mother's home. All family are very religious: one of my brothers used to offer a meal to our group of pilgrims. I was young; my mother was scared and she was harsh with me as she wanted to keep me under check. She did not allow me to go out of the village nor enjoy life with dresses of my liking, for instance. Moreover, I was very fond of the little son of my brother's, but he died when he was 4. I was in shock, and a person from the village suggested that to get relief I should take part in the Vārkarī pilgrimage. It was an immense joy, but with a regret: I could not read and write the *sant* literature, especially learn the *Haripāṭh*, a condition to fully partake in the pilgrimage. I could not recite as many *abhaṅgas* as the other pilgrims. My cousin wrote the alphabet on a sheet of paper and I studied it while keeping cattle and sheep in the field. I made a lot of effort, taking the help of pupils of the standard I and II whom I made my teachers. I took a *gurumantra* from two *gurus* in *Ālandī*.

The organizer of our *dindī*, Tukārām, was close to our family. Thanks to him and his insistence, I was allowed to join the group of pilgrims. I was observing serious fasts, walking on foot fifteen days, and never sitting in any truck on the way. An abiding rule among all the pilgrims is to endure pains and sufferings, otherwise 'the group to which you belong becomes lame'. I took the lead in 1991 with other women friends to form an independent group of pilgrims (men and women from our own village). Since then every year we do the pilgrimage for fifteen consecutive days during monsoon. We manage everything.

I made many bosom friends there. One elder pilgrim considered me like his daughter; he was ready even to leave me in legacy his one and a half acres of land. I refused and told him that he had better to give it to his nephew. He kept coming and staying with my parents for a couple of days at a time.

Every fortnight I go to *Ālandī*, not really for praying, but to meet friends and share life's happiness and sorrows. We are a group of about twenty *bhajan* singers who get invitations to perform in the surrounding villages. I keep in mind the words of Janabai: 'My head uncovered, my sari fallen on shoulders, I shall go to the crowded market, I shall fix my tent in the square at *Paṇḍharī*, I have prostituted myself, O god, says Jani, I have gone out to enter your house, god!' I use to see *Viṭṭhal* and bathe in the *Candrabhāgā* in my dreams. (Testimony of Darekarbai, Dhamari, *taluka* Shirur, Pune district)<sup>20</sup>

When we listen to a number of testimonies of common men and women explaining the reasons that prompt them to observe the *vārī* and

the benefits that they draw from it, we can classify their motivations, attitudes and psychological gains as follows:

1. Some newcomers casually attend, for instance, just to accompany parents or someone else from the family or a friend.
2. The pilgrimage provides mental entertainment, especially to many women who have hardly any opportunity to escape from daily chores and confinement to home and hearth. 'If there had not been a *vārī*, who would have sent us outside of the house?' is a common refrain. Thus, women upon whom many restrictions are imposed, get some freedom thanks to the *vārī*.
3. Free from daily tensions at home for a while, sorrows and worries are somehow forgotten. This brings psychological support and relief to those afflicted by family problems and other frustrations, in particular those elders who confide with bitterness that the younger generation is definitely not listening to them any more. This temporary mental respite may provide renewed motivation to face the same problems with more confidence.
4. Religious belief secures temporary solace. Pilgrims firmly believe that Pāṇḍuraṅga is the only god who will relieve them from worldly worries. 'Who is without problems? Such is our destiny. Are we going to get entry into paradise like Tukārām Mahārāj? Very few have this kind of fortune.' Whatever be the variety of sectarian currents of thought, faith in Viṭṭhal is an essential motive.
5. Ritual compulsion enforces hereditary functions taken on as a vow, for instance, the commitment to carry a flag during the *vārī*: 'Once you pick up the flag, you have to perform the *vārī*.' If that person dies, the vow is to be continued by his or her heirs. If necessary, one may board the vehicle, but the tradition must be continued, out of respect for parents' commitment. Some families make it a point to maintain an ancestral tradition.
6. A sense of life fulfilment and achievement is secured. 'Do nothing but take god's name,' is the advice. 'This will not go waste. At least this will be an achievement in life.' *Vārī* gives a feeling of having done something good and valuable. 'I have heard from people that if one step is taken with god on the road to Paṇḍharpūr that one step is transformed into one sacrifice (*yajña*). I felt

inspired to go in the *vārī* when I saw Brahman women, doctors, advocates and other such educated people walking with the *vārī* barefoot.’

7. ‘*Vārī* gives an occasion to visit several holy places: *Sants* have said, “Yes, Vārkarīs, Paṇḍharī is worth visiting.” After Paṇḍharpūr, sacred places like Gangapur, Tuljapur, Akkalkot, Nasik and Trimbakeshwar, are visited,’ say women from Radhanagari, district Kolhapur. Deities and *sants* welcome the pilgrims on the road: Parvati at Pune, Sopāndev at Saswad, Datta and Narayan Mahārāj at Narayanpur, Khandoba at Jejuri, Ganapati at Morgaon and Theur, Shankar at Shingnapur and Bhimashankar, Valmiki at Walhe, and so on. Moreover, the route that the *pālkhīs* take is often a fertile or plantation area.
8. It is a way of achieving prestige.
9. It helps develop arts like music (vocal and instrumental), various forms of popular dances, a number of popular literary forms and debating. The *vārī* may acquaint one with a variety of popular forms of expression and communication. A current of multifarious cultural exposure and exchanges is maintained. Recently, audio-cassettes of devotional songs and preachings are sold in plenty. Singers like Godavari Munde and *kirtankārs* like Bābā Mahārāj Satarkar, who became famous among the crowds of the *vārī* are later on broadcast on TV and radio. Modern technology turns the *vārī* into a commercial opportunity.

## Organization and Relational Set-up: *Pālkhīs* and *Dindīs*

The palanquin is the symbolic seat of a *sant*,<sup>21</sup> for instance: Dnyaneshvar (from Ālandī), Tukārām (the *sant*-poet from Dehu), Sopāndev (from Saswad), Tukārām Mahārāj (from Tripute, Satara district), Damaji Mahārāj (Mangalveda, Solapur district), Nivṛtī Nāth (Trimbak, Nasik district), Ramdas (Sajjangadh, Satara district), Dnyanoba Mahārāj (Tuljapur, Osmanabad district), Purnananda Mahārāj (Belgao district, Karnataka), Rukhmini (Kondanpur, Amravati district), Muktabāi (Jalgaon) and Eknāth (Paithan, Aurangabad district); that exceptionally of a god: Shri Buteshvar (Nagpur), among others.

A Vārkarī feels enthused to go on a *vārī* to meet Viṭhobā in the company of his *sants*, in the middle of a multitude of *sants*, and all his Vārkarī companions. All the *sants* surround and support him in his march towards Viṭhobā, his supreme urge. Once he has taken the *darśan* of his beloved ‘Mother’, gratified and strengthened by Viṭhobā’s gaze at him, he immediately leaves the place and returns to his fields watered by monsoon rains and worldly affairs. About fifty pilgrims only will accompany the palanquin back home. Devotees who cannot afford to take the road to Paṇḍharpūr and be there on *ekādaśī* will assemble in a nearby temple for a *bhajan* or a *kirtan*.

Conveyance in palanquin used to be a display of power and glory for the erstwhile feudal princes. They were carried on particular circumstances, for instance, while going to war, celebrating a military victory or a hero fallen in the battlefield, on Dasarā,<sup>22</sup> a festival associated with the ‘crossing of the frontiers’ after the harvest, which signals the start of military aggression or at least a show of power.

The palanquins of the *vārī* are made of wood. They are adorned with beautiful cloth and decorations, covered by a canopy. Silver or gold sheets, or plates of other metals are fixed on them to make them look precious. At both ends of the pole a lion’s head is carved. Upon a small seat inside are placed, without fail, the *sant*’s *pādukā* (footprints), with an image or a photo in a few palanquins. An umbrella and a *chowrie* (fly-whisk) goes along with the palanquin, which remains for pilgrims and onlookers, as in the time of feudal ceremonials, an emblem of grandeur and honour. The *pālkhī* is normally carried on shoulders, but those taken out during the *vārī* are usually carried in a bullock cart, called a ‘chariot’, *rath*, decorated like a small temple, drawn by ‘bullocks of honour’, and topped by effigies of Garud and Maruti. Small flags are put on it. In the cart, in a tray in front of it, are placed a fragrant powder, *bukkā*, and flowers. A small box is also there for *dakśinā* (offerings in cash). Believers offer *bukkā* and flowers and take *darśan*.

The procession of the palanquin resembles a royal march past or a military parade. It does not only structurally present itself as a warriors’ procession, those who monitor it believe it to be a triumphant march, a display of power. A ‘horse of honour’ walks in front of each *pālkhī*, without a rider as he carries the god, ‘opening’ the march. It is protected by another horse following immediately behind and mounted by a bodyguard dressed in the uniform of former Marāmhā

soldiers and holding a saffron flag. Then follow groups of pilgrims, ‘the Vārkarīs; they are the soldiers of the Bhāgavat *dharma* cult,’ explains Shrimant Sardar Shitole Ankalikar, the descendant and heir of the chieftain who founded the Dnyaneswar *pālkhī*.<sup>23</sup> Vārkarīs wear cymbals—as weapon—around their necks and play them loudly while they march, chanting in unison. ‘The horse of honour is the symbol of Bhāgavat *dharma*’, according to Sardar Shitole, who in this regard draws the attention to the run of the horse in the *ringaṇ!*’ (see later): ‘Look at the mettlesome run of the horse storming in the *ringaṇ!*’ All manners in which a horse is set free to trample, similar to the horse of the Rājasūya sacrifice,<sup>24</sup> are conquered and brought under the reign of Bhāgavat *dharma*. As a matter of fact, the spread of Bhāgavat *dharma* among the population of western India roughly corresponds to the area covered by the procession of *pālkhī* behind their ‘horse of honour’ towards Paṇḍharī along the roads of Konkan, western Maharashtra, Marathwada and Vidarbha.<sup>25</sup>

As long as nobody stopped the horse of the *Rājasūya*, the rule of its prince would spread unhindered all over the territory that it had covered; were someone to stop it and impose a frontier, a war of conquest would start. Similarly, it sometimes happen that pilgrims who have complaints stop the horse of their *pālkhī*, The *copdārs* (ushers) come and investigate the matter; then follows a meeting attended by all the heads of *dindīs* of the concerned *pālkhī* and the matter is settled by a final decision taken, for instance, in the case of Dnyaneshwar *pālkhī*, in the *durbar* or council of Sardar Shitole, head of the Panch Committee (five member committee) composed of the main leaders and heads of his *pālkhī*. The *durbar* of Sardar Shitole is used to hold such sessions mainly at Lonand, where, to quote pilgrims filled with wonder at the idea of the authority of his judgement, ‘The Sardar sits on the *gādī* to dispense justice on the spot, no need of appeal afterwards.’ The road then is again open to the horse and the undisputed sovereignty of the Bhāgavat *dharma* goes on spreading.

The palanquin is placed in the middle of the procession, surrounded or as if it were shielded by *dindīs* ahead and behind, those who carry flags walking ahead of their respective *dindīs*, while the veena players close the march. All along the road, whenever onlookers assemble and particularly while entering villages and towns, devotees press and crowd to take the *darśan* and touch the *pādukā* of the sant.

Dnyanadev (1275–96) informs us in his *abhaṅga* number 72 (Sant Literature 1967) that it is Pundalik, a devotee of Viṭṭhal, who installed the god's idol in the Paharpūr temple (constructed in 1187), and that his own parents as well as those of *sant* Nāmdev (1270–1350)<sup>26</sup> used to go on a pilgrimage on foot to worship Viṭhobā. Nāmdev and other Bhakti *sants* initiated the habit of forming groups of pilgrims walking to Paharpūr. At the time of Tukārām (1608–49), this had become a widespread practice. Tukārām's son, Narayan Mahārāj, is credited with the initiative of taking the road of Paṇḍharī to meet Viṭṭhal with the *pālkhī* of Dnyanoba–Tukārām (Tukārām's *pādukā*), both of them associated and known as having reached heaven alive, Dnyanadev through 'living *samādhi*', while Tukārām is believed to have been lifted up to heaven by a flower-plane. The princely houses and their captains, such as Ramchandra Pant Amatya and Sardar Dabhade, gave a steady, conspicuous and interested political and financial backing not only to the *vārī* but also to related institutions. Records dated 1685 in the Dehu *devasthān*, document it. The dignified 'right to serve' (*devasthān hakka*), and the prestigious 'honour and authority' (*mānpān*), conferred on all those who had a function, a task, the power of decision making in the management, working and control of everything pertaining to the organization and daily activities of the *vārī* and related institutions, soon became matters of contest and harsh competition. As a result, not only the number of *pālkhīs* increased, but the originally united flow of the Dnyanoba–Tukārām Bhakti broke up into splinter groups under the pressure of various influences, power interests, sects and allegiances. Eknāth (1548–1600)<sup>27</sup> raised his voice against such divisive trends in the name of unity of the Bhakti movement in western Maharashtra, afraid that this would lead to its perversion and collapse. As a matter of fact, a spirit of competition prompted by different motives made the number of Vārkarīs swell proportionately to the number of rival groups and particular interests.

Today, Vārkarīs throng in particularly large numbers—in hundreds of thousands<sup>28</sup>—for the *vārī* of Āṣāḍh as they are keen to accompany one of the 300 palanquins that take the road to Paharpūr. To mention some of the most prestigious ones: Jñānadev's *pālkhī* from Ālāndī (a total of 150,000), Tukārām's *pālkhī* from Dehu (about 100,000), Sopāndev's *pālkhī* from Saswad, Eknāth's *pālkhī* from Paithan and Muktabāī's *pālkhī* from Mehun. All the *pālkhīs* have joined into an

apex organization, while each of them is the offshoot of a registered religious institution. The repeated discourse from various kinds of leaders displays in front of all the pilgrims a picture of the Vārkarī movement as one of an immense, free river of common people who join on their own, and enthusiastically, with no one to control, plan, influence or direct them; it also displays an innate capacity to naturally discipline itself. In fact, the flow is kept moving within a well-defined organizational set-up. Each *dindī* is led by a head or main organizer who cares for the whole planning and progress of the group, with the help of a guardian, the *copdār*, who like a supervisor (with the signs of his office and status: a staff in hand, the head covered with either a turban, a *pāgoṭe* or a *pagaḍī*, traditional emblems of prestige and authority bestowed on him at the court of maharajas, and dressed in the uniform of former Marāthā soldiers) looks after order and discipline; and a veena player, who cares particularly for the proper performance of religious programmes. Each *pālkhī* is itself under the direction of its own leader and *copdār*. Besides this, each *pālkhī* has also its *mālak* (literally, ‘owner’), a kind of overall director who wields absolute authority over the leader of his own *pālkhī* and the latter’s *dindī*. *Mālaks* are the supreme heads of religious institutions. The leader of their *pālkhī* is appointed by them with the trustees of their institutions from among whom he is selected.

Some heads and leaders enjoy a particularly significant moral and religious authority over the whole *vārī* on various accounts: (a) they take up the initiative of launching a new *pālkhī*; (b) they are particularly knowledgeable about Bhakti authoritative reference sources,<sup>29</sup> which they have studied and about which they preach; (c) they have prepared *mālikās* (compilations of texts) from a wide variety of *sant* poets to be sung during the *vārī*;<sup>30</sup> and (d) they distinguish themselves and attract the admiration and respect of pilgrims by their observance of religious rituals and practices.<sup>31</sup>

Members of Legislative Assemblies and Parliament, ministers, heads of landed aristocratic families and heads of local civic bodies have a vested interest to maintain close relations with all those involved in the *vārī*, such as influential individuals and institutions. The latter, reciprocally, look for such close and good relations as they need the assistance and financial support of the state administration to develop the facilities required to welcome huge crowds of pilgrims. Important

grants are sanctioned to local religious institutions, though not directly for religious functions, but for development and maintenance of the whole environment (for instance, along the river Indrayani at Ālandī a series of arches have been erected and staircases have been constructed for bathing and washing; government subsidies were given for the cheap publication of the *Jñāneśvarī* and other Bhakti sources; construction of a seven-storey *darśan mandap* [platform] in Paṇḍharpūr to welcome pilgrims queuing for *darśan*, and offering a protected column of 9 km). Similar grants are also made to local civic bodies for road, water supply, health and sanitation, guest houses, land to religious educational institutions, and so on. For instance, every year, the government provides funds to the Paharpūr council for the development of various facilities in the whole area: In 1999 a grant of Rs 160 million was sanctioned.<sup>32</sup> The Maharashtra chief minister walks with the pilgrims for 2 to 3 km every year and attends the *mahāpūja*,<sup>33</sup> the most important ritual, taking place in the temple of Paṇḍharpūr at the government's expense, where one government representative and one Vārkarī perform on behalf of the government. Wide publicity is given to the event, and the chief minister makes promises and statements to please pilgrims and win their hearts.

Political parties, the government and various kinds of non-government institutions, development and social associations, religious sects and concerns, merchants, salesmen and propagandists of a number of cultural and socio-political currents of thoughts take the opportunity to propagate their ideology and promote their products. They distribute their goods as free samples with leaflets. They set up booths to welcome the Vārkarīs along their way. They install loudspeakers and play audio-cassettes propagating their views. They make their own publicity, circulating pamphlets among the leaders of the *vārī*, advertising themselves, their goods and ideas.

It is worthwhile observing carefully the deceptive play of the local leader standing with his supporters around him on the *dais*, near a few chairs and a table below a multicoloured banner or advertising streamer. He exhibits his admiration and devotion to the Vārkarīs by smiling gently, folding hands with affectation and an apparent great modesty. Though he would never otherwise wear any religious marks on the forehead, on that particular day he ostentatiously displays marks of *gopīcandan* and *bukkā* in a manner distinctive of his party, cultural

association or religious affiliation. Simple pilgrims whisper his praise to each other: coming from all over Maharashtra, how could they ably judge of his honesty or otherwise. Usually it is only locals who scoff at the hypocrisy.<sup>34</sup> The local leader and his associates take *darśan* of the *pālkhī* while a photographer called for the purpose takes snapshots to be published in the press the next day. Video films are also shot for propaganda to be made later on through cable TV networks or on any other occasion such as a political campaign. A show of generosity is staged by distributing tea, bananas or other eatables; photographers happen to be there again. The public may be shown these photos at the time of campaign for elections to the corporation. Sometimes the scene of distribution of such food items as well as of blankets, raincoats, umbrella and slippers looks pathetic. Distributors seemingly play with the Vārkarīs like a cat plays with a mouse. Poor Vārkarīs may crowd around to snatch the goods offered, which makes the distributor angry. As he shouts at them in vain to maintain a proper queue, he may be ignored. This could result in an abrupt conclusion to the distribution. As he escapes, Vārkarīs will often run behind him. As the goods offered are bound to be insufficient for such big crowds, and appear as rare opportunities for those who covet them, naturally many have to give up, frustrated, while a few only can go home contented.

In view of the huge number of pilgrims, the state administration provides facilities and infrastructure to facilitate the journey of the *vārī*. Water tankers accompany them. They bring water from the nearby villages or towns. All the wells, lakes and other sources of water supply along the route are cleaned with bleaching powder. Dams' gates are opened to supply water to rivers, canals and draw-wells during this period. The government machinery feels committed to supply enough protected water till pilgrims reach home. Kerosene and other items usually sold in ration shops, such as oil, sugar and grains, are also made available at cheaper rates. There are mobile toilets, although these are insufficient and Vārkarīs avoid using them as they are dirty. There are also ambulances and mobile dispensaries of the health service. The most important *pālkhīs* on yearly request and submission of their daily planning, route and numbers, receive a grant of Rs 50,000 for health and water supply through the *taluka* administrative departments; while the others receive grants according to their numbers. City corporations and district departments also contribute. *Dindīs* that go on their own

without joining a *pāḷkhī*, receive the same type of support along their routes according to the number of days and people, and on demand and similar submission of daily planning. Police services are also present to see that no incidents of any type take place. They care for movement on roads and avoidance of traffic jams. Senior police officers supervise the *vārī*, and are responsible for overseeing all the arrangements.

The time for each *pāḷkhī* to set off, *prasthān*, is fixed, and its route, course and progress thoroughly timetabled in advance. All associated *dinḍīs* are informed in due time. Although any individual can join the *vārī* and follow a palanquin of his/her choice or even walk independently at will, the great majority, as a rule, do not perform the pilgrimage as individuals, but as members of a *dinḍīs* and most of the *dinḍīs* affiliate themselves to a *pāḷkhī*. The *dinḍī* comprises any number of pilgrims, who perform the pilgrimage as a congregation of sorts formed for the purpose. They come together as people from a particular village or from a number of villages in a given area, as disciples attached to the same *guru*, or devotees of a particular *sant*. Members of the same caste also form their independent group.

Two months before the *prasthān*, all the *dinḍīs* that have associated themselves with a given *pāḷkhī* are informed by a letter about the programme. This programme is decided by a *panch* committee.<sup>35</sup> A meeting of heads of *dinḍīs* is held. Each *dinḍīs* carries a permanent number. A new *dinḍī* would apply to the *panch* committee and be recognized and given a number after three years on probation. The *dinḍīs* follow one another in order of their numbers.<sup>36</sup> As per the programme fixed, all *dinḍīs* gather at one place on the day of *prasthān*. Vārkarīs are present in great numbers at the place of the *prasthān*. As there is no place for all of them in the sanctuary of the temple, one or a couple of persons (usually the veena<sup>37</sup> player and the woman who carries the basil, with possibly some influential personality who is given this privilege) are invested with the honour of being called by the *copdār* inside as representatives of each *dinḍīs*. Each one is presented with a coconut as a special mark of respect. Then *āratī* is performed after a *pujā*; in the morning *abhiṣeka* has already been performed. The *pādukās* (the slippers or footprints) are carried by the men of honour on their heads and placed in the *pāḷkhī*, the name of which is invoked loudly to the sound of musical instruments. The *pāḷkhī* is then brought outside the temple. During this time, cymbals and drum (*mṛdaṅga*) and

*tutārī*<sup>38</sup> are played loudly. The *pālkhī* is then placed in the *rath* (chariot), drawn by ‘bullocks of honour’. Then the *pālkhī* makes its *prasthān* amidst acclamations to Viṭṭhal, Jñānadev, Tukārām and Pundalik and the resounding sounds of cymbals and drums. There are 150 *dinḍīs* with the *pālkhī* of Dnyaneshwar *māulī* and fifty with the *pālkhī* of Tukārām.

Each *dinḍī* is organized as a small institution with a president, vice-president and secretary for purposes of management. Usually, these trustees—the case of the eight *dinḍīs* with whom I am personally acquainted in Shirur *taluka*—are well-to-do farmers from the dominant Marāthā caste in Maharashtra or sometimes *guravs* (local non-Brahman priests). Some *dinḍīs* have grown in number, resources and activities as to register under the Public Trust Act and invest financial assets in building temples, running educational institutions, and so on.

During the pilgrimage, the essential task of those who manage the *dinḍīs* is to plan in detail all arrangements required to ensure that the Vārkarīs make the journey ‘taking the name of *Pāṇḍuraṅga*’ with minds free of worries.

Among the most respected religious functionaries of each *dinḍī* comes first its single veena player. Only a man enjoys the privilege of carrying a veena. Noticing that no women were seen carrying one, when I asked why, I was told that such a tradition does not exist. When the *Harīpāṭh* is being recited, sometimes standing in a circle, sometimes in two rows, the woman with the pot of basil and the woman carrying water have also the distinction of standing with the veena player in the centre near the flags, while the other people stand on the side. The importance of the veena is explained thus: it means *śṛtī*, and *śṛtī* is Veda, a *bhakta* being some one who holds the Veda in great respect. The veena is also associated with the sage Nārad.<sup>39</sup> This makes the veena player the soul of the *dinḍī*: he conducts the *bhajan*, wears a *māḷa*, keeps his head covered by a turban or a cap. He is the first to water the basil each morning, followed by each Vārkarī. He is also the first at whose feet other Vārkarīs bow. In short, he is considered the religious head of the *dinḍī*. In each *dinḍī* there should also be a woman carrying a basil in a pot on her head. As mentioned before, she is present at the *prasthān* with the veena player and will also accompany the *pālkhī* back. However, if she happens to have her period, she however, foregoes the honour for five days to someone else for reasons of ‘pollution’.

During periods of rest and halt, the four or five flags, the cymbals and veena are kept attached to one another. The veena is always kept hanging slightly above the ground. The veena player will never let his instrument touch the ground as it should never be put down. Elder Vārkarīs do not let even flags be put down. The basil and the drum are also kept together. All these are the emblems of identity and sanctity of the *dinḍī*.

A number of Vārkarīs (about 20 per cent) carry a pair of cymbals hanging around their neck. An equal number of them walk holding a small flag called a *patākā*, to implement a vow. Once the flag is picked up, the *vārī* must be performed; if that person dies, the practice is to be continued by his heirs. Thus, the one who holds a *patākā* has to prepare his successor, and holding a *patākā* has therefore become a hereditary practice.<sup>40</sup> If necessary, one may go on a vehicle, but the tradition must be continued.

Most of the *dinḍīs* arrange beforehand for a hired vehicle like a truck, tempo or tractor with a carriage. Some devotees permit the use of their own vehicle for free, with the *dinḍī*, members having to spend only on fuel. The vehicle of the *dinḍī* carries the baggage of the Vārkarīs, who keep with them only the few objects required on the road, such as a jug, a plastic sheet or umbrella against rains, and so on. The truck may also take those who find it impossible to walk to the next destination, where eating and sleeping arrangements have been made. Tents are erected for sleeping at fixed places every year; they either belong to the *dinḍī* or are hired. The charges of the people who erect the tents is fixed beforehand. People sleep wherever they can find place. There is a separate tent for the women. In some small *dinḍīs* men and women may sleep in the same tent.

Some people walk from their homes and do the *vārī* on their own, independently from any *dinḍī*. A few are even seen joining the pilgrims on two-wheelers or in a car with their whole family, but only for a few days. Such Vārkarīs leave for the *vārī* taking along with them their bedding, *gabāl* (plate, jug, umbrella or plastic sheet), clothes and other necessary belongings. Those who make the *vārī* individually carry their things with them and take the responsibility of looking after them.

Some people carry all this material on their heads. These independent Vārkarīs take shelter wherever a suitable place is found. Their journey is full of inconveniences, much more than the journey of those who

come in a *dinḍī* with a vehicle in which all belongings are kept, having just to carry the sundry things that might be needed while walking on the road. Those who make the pilgrimage individually, carrying their belongings on their head, sleeping on the roadside or in a temple, are the poorest, such as agricultural labourers, beggars, lepers, and so on, or those who do not enjoy enough social recognition to be co-opted in a group. As a rough approximate, they may represent 10 per cent of the Vārkarīs. They are never invited by a *dinḍī* for meals. They mainly live on food occasionally offered on the road by onlookers, and put aside a surplus for the next day. They may sit with everybody when a village committee freely offers food to all in general. *Dinḍī* people look upon them with suspicion and contempt.

The *dinḍī* cares for its social image, and may abide by ritualistic rules of purity and pollution, and caste habits such as those preventing free relations with Untouchables. For instance, in the Dhamari *dinḍī* nobody has ever made an effort to co-opt Untouchables, some even talking contemptuously about them, and nobody is willing to admit them to share the common meal on the road during the *vārī*. Some are naturally left out of the *dinḍī* for lack of money to pay the admission fees, lack of acquaintances with *dinḍī* members, lack of family relations, or lack of good social repute. Somebody alien to the members of the group would not be admitted without serious investigation and explicit recommendation or patronage of a member who carries some authority or influence with the group. Objectionable individuals are hardly welcomed. Participation in a *dinḍī* is a guarded privilege, and within it cleavages due to social status repeat themselves exactly as in the daily relations in village society.

There is enough ration stored in the vehicles that follow the *dinḍī*. A hearth of stones is installed near the tent for cooking, and a separate cook is appointed. Old people coming with the *dinḍī* help the cook. Some *dinḍīs* carry stoves and at times also gas cylinders. As cooking has to be done for many people, the *dinḍīs* either have all types and sizes of pots and pans accordingly, or these may be either purchased or hired.

Electricity is brought wherever available. But Petromax lamps and lanterns are kept as an alternative arrangement. Light is provided for each tent. The bedding and *gabāl* brought by the people are kept neatly. Care is taken to see that everyone gets what he wants when he needs it.

Persons are appointed to look after these belongings, food supply and cooking, light arrangement, mic, sound box, etc., and make all needed arrangements. When the *dinḍī* becomes important, workers and attendants (*sevekarīs*), and specialists are hired and duly paid for these jobs. Cooks are always specially engaged against salary.

All arrangements are present to take someone to the hospital if required, or to transport someone in a vehicle to the next destination if he is unable to walk, even to drop home those who are not able to complete the *vārī*. Those who cover the distance sitting in the vehicle pay a particular amount. Arrangements for meals have been made in some places beforehand. Some donors may provide meals, tea or snacks to the whole *dinḍī*. The date and time of this meal are brought beforehand to the notice of the donor by the secretary through a letter. The number of people in the *dinḍī* is also stated for information. Some donors who cannot give meals to all, give millet bread and vegetables to the *Vārkarī* as they can afford. Some give meals to five or eleven *Vārkarīs*. If no one is offering meals, then the *dinḍī* serves its own.

A kind of fees (*bhiśśī*) is paid by each member of the *dinḍī*, which entitles participation in all the activities of the *dinḍī* and avail of the facilities offered. This varies from Rs 51 to over Rs 500. Some *dinḍīs* do not take *bhiśśī* but accept voluntary donations.

Among the thousands of *Vārkarīs* accompanying each *pāḷkhī* there are regulars as well as newcomers. It becomes difficult for a newcomer to recognize his own *bhiśśī* in such a big crowd, especially if they get separated by roaming around, for instance, to see a *ringaṇ*. Each *dinḍī*, therefore, keeps a sign for identifying itself. For example, most use a flag for identification and tie a tassel of a particular colour or several tassels to the end of the flag, colour the stick of the flag, tie a balloon of a particular colour to the flag, slightly change the shape or colour of the flag, etc. A flag is easily visible as it is held high, which is why most of *dinḍīs* make use of it for identification.

Two contrasted examples will give a hint of the variety of the *dinḍīs* and of their history.

### *The Creation of the Dinḍī from Dhamari*

Dhamari is a village of about 5,000 people in the *taluka* of Shirur (district Pune), with two important yearly *yatras* or religious assemblies, and a couple of yearly *harinam saptāhas* (consisting of

*kirtans* and reading of the *Jñāneśvarī*, *Tukārām Gāthā* and *Eknāthī Bhāgavat* among others for seven consecutive days). Two groups of *bhajani bharud* (popular devotional theatre) perform attractive musical dramas using modern techniques of light effects based on Puranic narratives, folk stories and *bhajans*. There is also a *bhajani mandal* in the village, a group of people formed to sing *bhajans*. There used to be a *bhajan* or sometimes a *kirtan* on every eleventh day after the full moon and the new moon. There are three big temples in the village (Khandoba, Viṭṭhal–Rukhmini and Maruti), and a fourth one is under construction. Moreover, people from Dhamari used to go to Paṇḍharpūr and Ālandī with the *dinḍīs* of Hivare–Mandalwadi as there was no *dinḍīs* from their village. What prompted them to set up their own was that during one pilgrimage, when rains poured down, people of Hivare–Mandalwadi boarded their truck and went ahead, leaving the Dhamari people to continue on foot in the heavy rains. When the latter reached the halt, others had already settled in the tents leaving no place for their companions. A quarrel followed.

Amritnath Swāmi,<sup>41</sup> a religious preacher of the Bhāgavat *dharma* used to come to Dhamari. People from the village used to respect him. He was the *guru* of many in that area, and the head of several *dinḍīs*, including Hivare–Mandalwadi. He supported their intention to form a separate *dinḍī* in the village ten years ago as this was likely to expand the number of his disciples and his influence in the area. In the beginning the Dhamari *dinḍī* joined the *pālkhī* of Dnyaneshwar *māulī*. Later, they started going with the *pālkhī* of Tukārām Mahārāj. In the first year itself forty-four people participated in the *vārī*. Their number has been constantly growing. Nowadays, they are about sixty, and form the biggest of the *dinḍīs* in this area owing allegiance to Amritnath Swāmi. The *Swāmi* has passed away since then, and the Dhamari *dinḍī* on this account—Dhamari being a village with a larger population—has gained a kind of control over the others and their village community on the whole. Most of the people in this *dinḍī* belong to Marāthā and Mali castes. Only one person each from Shimpi, Sonar and Brahman castes are present. Most of the men are well-to-do farmers, especially those who take the lead and run the *dinḍī*. The year I attended, out of sixteen women, five were deserted, four each were widows and elders, one was with her husband, one young girl student and one married woman of controversial repute. The latter had left her husband's home and had

come alone in the *vārī*. People told me that she did not have a ‘good character’. Her husband is a farmer. She had left her two small children with her husband. In 1999 the strength of the *dinḍī* rose to 160.

### *Kendre Samaj Dinḍī*

More than 5,000 Vārkarīs participate in the Kendre Samaj *dinḍī*, the largest to accompany the *pālkhī* of Dnyaneshwar *māuli*. Its people hail mainly from the *talukas* of Khed, Shirur, Ambegao, Junner, and so on. The head of this *dinḍī* is respectfully referred to as Kendre Sarkar. The *bhiśśī* of this *dinḍī* is Rs 500. There is plenty to eat and huge trays of sweets like *gulabjam* and *basundi* are brought. There are big tents for sleeping, each with a Petromax lamp, and there are separate sleeping arrangements for women. There is a tanker for water; there is gas for cooking. They do not ask the Vārkarīs to do any work, but hire employees. The *dinḍī* is managed as a well-disciplined institution. The whole thing is very regal.

Kendre, the head of this *dinḍī* is very conservative. He keeps repeating in his *kirtan* sentences, like the following one: ‘A widow’s face should not be the first thing that one sees in the morning,’ which demean women. I have heard that he has got a beating several times because of this. Among the many workers working in his *dharmshala*, there 200 women who are widows and deserted women.

## Religious and Festive Rituals, Sects and *Swāmis*

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Our final observations focus on the forms of personal communicative interactions characteristic of four kinds of religious practices: compulsory ritual observances to be daily attended in each *dinḍī*; a general colourful performance specific to the *vārī*, known as the *ringaṇ* (circle), in which all the members of a *pālkhī* fervently participate; the competition among religious sects making a bid to increase their strength and the personal rapport that Bhakti mentors entertain with their disciples. Our interest is not in the content of advices and import of discourses, which may possibly perplex and bewilder an observer, but on the shape and strategic purpose of communicative practices.

Once Vārkarīs have reached their destination for the night, they are to attend a *pravacan*, an *ārati* and a *kirtan* in the evening.

A knowledgeable person—necessarily a man—from the *dinḍī* gives the *pravacan*. He may be the leader of the group, the veena player, a *gurav* or someone else; in any case, his authority is grounded in the fact that besides being a *mākarī* and following all the observances of a perfect Vārkarī as earlier stated, he must have spent a substantial time of his life studying the Bhakti sources and possibly obtained a degree called Hari Bhakti Parāya (known in short as HBP) or Vimmhal Bhakti Parāyaṇ (VBP) received after a course lasting a couple of years, and usually imparted in Ólandī, Dehu and Paharpūr.

Generally, the performer selects a distich from *Jñāneśvarī* and comments upon it. In a *pravacan*, emphasis is placed on the importance of *bhakti*, the necessity of the *vārī* and its rules, and the norms and spirit which should guide a *bhakta* in life. Among the points regularly stressed are the necessity of ‘remembering the name’; the indispensable role of a *guru* upon whom the devotee should completely rely, surrendering to him with absolute trust and faith to the point of renouncing any personal and independent thinking, as only the *guru* is capable of showing the right path; the world being a complete illusion, as Shri Kṛṣṇa explained to Arjuna, in the Bhagvad Gita; everyone’s *karma* (course of life) being definitely fixed before coming into existence; and the consequent persuasion that one is a mere instrument through which all actions and life are executed, nothing being in our hands—success or failure, life and death, happiness and suffering being mere games that gods play as per their will.

The *āratī* is a collective ritual, sung by all twice a day, morning and evening, to the glory of the *sant* of the *dinḍī*. Thus, in the *dinḍīs* I took part, it was an *āratī* sung<sup>42</sup> to Jñānadev, Tukārām and Viṭṭhal. *Kirtans*, preachings administered necessarily by a man, take place at night. The performer, the *kirtankār*<sup>43</sup> must necessarily be a HBP or VBP. He may belong to any caste, but must definitely have some knowledge about the Vedas, Bhagvad Gita, *Jñāneśvarī*, and so on. He takes an *abhaṅga* and comments upon it. Often a mythological story is narrated in the *kirtan* to convince the audience of the importance of remembering the name of god. In the *kirtan* of the Vārkarīs, those with cymbals stand behind the *kirtankār* and accompany him, whereas in the *kirtan* of Gadge Mahārāj, those who play cymbals may sit.

A *pujā* is performed early morning, exclusively by a male Brahman, who first takes a bath, applies a spot of black clay, *bukkā*, etc. *Haripāṭh*

is normally recited during the *pujā*. The Bhakti compositions of *sant* Tukārām, Jñānadev, Nāmdev and Eknāth are mainly sung with the *Haripāth*.

The whole *dinḍī* is present for the *Haripāth*. The hymn is chanted while dancing in a full or half circle or on two rows, in the rhythm of the cymbals. All may not dance, though the dancers usually playfully draw in the onlookers, who in any case intensely associate themselves to the chanting, and may be waiting for a hand stretching towards them and helping them brush away inhibitions and join the dance. The atmosphere is one of joyful rapture, slowly but steadily turning into a trance-like state. Few can resist and remain aloof. One feels spontaneously pushed from within and attracted to merge into the group, despite inbuilt social reticence. Fear of sullying one's social reputation, apprehension of making oneself look ridiculous for want of self-restraint and good manners, natural shyness and timidity refrain some from entering into the dance, and they remain sitting. Most are prompted to forget their sorrows, matters of concern and everything else, including oneself. The feeling of oneness is so strong that one does not bother about differences of status, gender and individualities; the dance forges all into one mind and one body. The trance-like setting leads one towards a state of mind that may give a hint of blissful *samādhī*. This is my own repeated experience. I have shared it with many after having dared to discard my own hesitations and reluctance to join, imposed, as I then realized, by a repressive school education and inhibiting social surroundings.<sup>44</sup> This state of collective rapture is again experienced on a larger scale in the *riṅgaṇ*. This experience is definitely the beating heart of the *vārī*. It explains the latter's tremendous increasing appeal.

The *riṅgaṇ* is the most impressive and characteristic ceremony of the *vārī*. It lasts an hour or hour and a half. It is performed by many *pālkhīs*, during the *vārī* only, in some particular villages located on the Vārkarīs' way to Paṇḍharī. For instance, the *riṅgaṇ* of the *pālkhī* of Tukārām takes place at Indapur, Akluj, Belawdi, Vakhari, Malinagar and Bajirao Vihir, and the *pālkhī* of Dnyaneshwar *māulī* at Vakhari, Lonand, Sadashiv Nagar, Kudus Phata and Velapur. There are two types of *riṅgaṇ*, circular and standing in two rows facing each other.

For the circular *riṅgaṇ*, the *pālkhī* is placed in the centre of a large ground, the *panch* committee standing nearby with the *copdār*.

All the Vārkarīs form a large outer circle along the edges of the ground. The *copdār* gives all the instructions and monitors proceedings from the centre. First, he invites all those with cymbals, who stand in their *dinḍī* in the outer circle, to play in unison sometimes more and more loudly, sometimes slowly, while acclaiming: ‘Jñānadev–Tukārām!’; ‘Jñānbā–Tukārām!’; ‘Jñānbā–Māulī–Tukārām!’; etc., on varying rhythms. Meanwhile, people assemble and an irresistibly hypnotizing festive atmosphere is created. After a while, the *copdār* calls those holding *dinḍī* flags to come forward. They are set dancing around the *pālkhī* in the free space between the *dinḍīs* and the *pālkhī* to the beat of the cymbals and the *mṛdanga*. Their speed increases as the sound of the cymbals rises. They chant and acclaim the name of Viṭṭhal. Once their speed has reached a peak, suddenly the direction of the movement is reversed. There is confusion for a second or so, but again they progressively gather speed. Both, those who are running in the *riṅgaṇ* and those who are watching them, are full of excitement and vigour.

After the flags have completed their run, it is the turn of the *mṛdanga* players to be called and dance around the *pālkhī*, in the same manner. Then veena players, women with the basil on the head and women carrying water, all give the same performance. While the *riṅgaṇ* is in progress, women play games like *phugaḍī*.

Then comes the turn of the cymbal players to be called to dance around the *pālkhī*. They play, chant and dance with great enthusiasm, lying on their backs, lying on their stomachs, sitting on their knees, jumping, raising their hands up and down. The whole atmosphere is filled with the chanting of Viṭṭhal’s name, uttered with different scansions of syllables and rhythm. There is no limit to the joy. No one is aware of anything else; they are enraptured.

Then the *pālkhī*’s ‘horse of honour’, without rider, enters the ranks behind its mounted horse guard. It takes three fast runs, clockwise, around the *pālkhī* amidst the chanting of Viṭṭhal’s name. This is similar to the course taken by all the previous performers clockwise around the *pālkhī*, the direction of the *pradakṣiṇā* (devotees walking around the cellar of a temple). While the horse is running around, people pick up the earth from under its feet and apply it to their foreheads. They believe that god himself is riding the horse. After it has completed three rounds, sometimes four or five, or even eight as in July 1999, the horse is made to bow his head in front of the chariot and takes the *pālkhī*’s *darśan*.

If the horse is hesitating, unwilling to run properly and storm around with vigour, Vārkarīs see this as a bad omen, a portent. Vārkarīs are, therefore, attentive to the behaviour of the horse, in particular whether it runs a full circle three times without hesitation, this being viewed as a sign of ‘fullness’, a guarantee of good crops for the coming season. The more it runs and the faster, the better the year to come.

An *ārati* is then performed, which signals the end of *ringaṇ*.

In the standing *ringaṇ* Vārkarīs stand in two lines facing each other on both sides of the road. The same sequence of events are performed as in a circular *ringaṇ*.

Though Viṭṭhal is the unique deity of all, many undercurrents are noticed in the Vārkarī movement. Sects like the Nāth, Vaishnava, Shaiva, Datta Sampradāya, Chaitanya, Gadage Mahārāj, Mahanubhav, Maheshwari, Swadhyay, Nirankari, Ramdasi and mainly the Bhāgavat *dharma* trend are trying to control the whole event, if not bring the whole movement within their fold, or at least extend their hold among the pilgrims. Each one vies with the other to take advantage of the *vārī* for propaganda, some of them even claiming ‘a right of ownership’ on the Vārkarī tradition. The debate whether Viṭṭhal is a Shaiva or Vaishnava god has been going on for long. If other traditions like Jain and Buddhist sects stake similar claims on Viṭṭhal, they are not seen in the *vārī*. All other sects have their own sets of *bhajan*, *Haripāṭh* and *abhaṅga*, and compose books of new *purāṇas*<sup>45</sup> to lay a ground and claim legitimacy for their claims. They adroitly take advantage of the persuasion shared by all devotees that the pious reading of holy books is a meritorious practice. Even a simple doubt about the sanctity and veracity of a scripture is a sin that the *bhaktas* would not commit. The authority of a written text is such that a book can hardly be doubted, especially in the case of a holy book. Faith in them is absolute; the written word is truth by nature. Sects take advantage of these convictions and representations to force their claims into the minds of *bhaktas*.

Only two sects, the Prajapita Vishwa Brahmakumari, which does not recognize Krishna as supreme god, and the Hare Krishna cult are not welcome by heads of *pālkhī*, and left aside as they do not agree with the Vārkarī tradition. Still, they might participate in the *vārī*, but keeping a distance on the road from the recognized groups, lagging behind the *pālkhīs*, which they are not allowed to join.

For the Shaiva sect, Paṇḍharpūr and Ālandī are ancient Shaiva centres. According to them, inside the Paṇḍharpūr temple, in the main sanctuary, there was only Viṭṭhal; Rukhmini and other deities were installed later, and, moreover, Viṭṭhal is just carrying a Śivliṅga (an icon of Lord Shiva) on his head—there is in fact no idol of Viṭṭhal but only the Śivliṅga.<sup>46</sup> The sect consequently claims a right on *Viṭṭhal* and the Vārkarī tradition.

The Nāth sect, which places itself in the Shaiva tradition, claims a big contribution in the formation of the Vārkarī movement. It started with Adināth and reached through Gahinināth upto Nivṛttī Nāth, who initiated Dnyanadev. Each person from the sect adds ‘Nath’ to his name, like Macchindranath, Adinath, Gorakshanath, etc. But it is not so for Dnyanadev, who does not call himself a member of the Nāth sect. The fact is that the number of Vārkarīs who revere Dnyanadev is the highest, and that the guru tradition of Dnyanadev comes from the Nāth sect.

The Vaishnava sect knows Viṭṭhal as one of the ten avatars of Viṣṇu who came to Paṇḍharpūr as Kṛṣṇa and stood waiting on a brick for the sake of his devotee Pundalik. Viṭṭhal was Kṛṣṇa himself. The sect, therefore, considers Viṭṭhal as theirs. They play on the words *Viṭhū Viṭṭhū-Viṣṇū*. For them the Vārkarī trend is only a Vaishnava sect. In spite of this, they remain silent as to why the idol of *Viṭṭhal* does not have four hands, a conch, a wheel and mass like Viṣṇu.

What prominently marks the *vārī* is the Bhāgavat *dharma* tradition, practically defined by its proponents as being identical to the Bhakti tradition in western Maharashtra, and as a result authoritatively owning the Vārkarī movement. The sage Vyas is credited with the writing of *Shrimat Bhāgavat*, which deals mainly with god Kṛṣṇa and his teaching to Arjuna; its eleventh chapter has been commented upon and expanded by the *sant* poet Eknāth from Paithan in his *Eknāthi Bhāgavat*, a work considered as an authoritative reference of the Bhakti cult in Maharashtra, and propounding precisely what goes under the name of Bhāgavat *dharma* preached by Eknāth. Viṭṭhal here is an avatar of Kṛṣṇa. Members of the sect know all the verses of *Eknāthi Bhāgavat* by heart. The Haripāṭh of Eknāth Mahārāj is also held in great esteem among them and recited along with the Dnyaneshwar’s *Haripāṭh*. This is the reference that I have heard leading organizers of the *vārī* extol under the name of Bhāgavat *dharma* as the idiom of their ascendancy over the crowd of *bhaktas*.

The following incident may be recalled as exemplary of the will to power that a sectarian cultural idiom carries, that of Bhāgavat *dharma*, which has succeeded to give legitimacy to one's control and authority over the majority of Vārkarīs as head of the most prestigious and prominent of them, Dnyanadev's *pālkhīs*, as we have seen earlier.

Pundit Sankaye from Latur district had been living in Ālandī for fifty years. He assisted the trustees of Dabewala *dharmshala* to get land for their building, and stayed there as its manager. A devotee of Viṭṭhal, he acquired a deep knowledge of spiritual matters. He was held in high respect by everybody. Well-read in many religious books, Pundit Sankaye had noticed their internal contradictions. He came to the conclusion that they were a ruse of the Brahmans. Enthused by *sant* Gadage Mahārāj's *kirtans*, he started writing what he felt about religious literature in a book entitled *Varkari Sect is not a Vaishnava but a Shaiva Sect*. His self-destructive teachings of religious books became famous. Religious authorities were stunned. Two hundred Vārkarīs demonstrated in front of Dabewala *dharmshala* and shouted, 'Sankaye, go away from here. If you don't go away, we will either burn ourselves or we will burn you.' They drove Sankaye away, and people started saying that the man had lost his balance or gone mad. Religious authorities objected, saying: 'What are we going to get by abusing the knowledge of spiritual matters on which we make a living? Nobody has a right to criticize Dnyaneshwar *māulī*. Criticizing him amounts to pretending to be superior to him.'

The forms of personal rapport between Vārkarīs and their spiritual mentors confirms and exemplifies the principle of a guru's absolute authority. For the sake of their own interests and for maintaining a state of mental dominance if not personal bondage for all purposes on the faithful, those identified and recognized as *guru*, *pundit*, *swāmi*, *bābā*, *buṇḍā* and *mahārāj* forcefully impress on Vārkarīs' minds the belief that without a *guru* there can be no knowledge or liberation. One typical example is sufficient to concretely display the type of relationships between *bhaktas* and their spiritual guides on the one hand, and, on the other, the modality of expressive communication that these guides mainly use to transmit their message.

Shyam Bābā, a disciple of Amritnath Swāmi, the preacher of Bhāgavat *dharma*, is in charge of the *sant* Amritnath Swāmi Mahārāj Dharmshala. He is about 50 years old, 1.5 m tall and very fat. Moving with difficulty,

he needs support to walk. He sits cross-legged on a separate seat (a mattress and a bolster) in the *samādhī* temple of the *dharmshala*. He holds a rosary in hand and chants god's name, counting with the beads. In the *samādhī* temple there is Amritnath Swāmi's *samādhī*, an idol of Viṭṭhal and Rukhmini, small sanctuaries of a number of gods, a lot of boards giving lists of donors to the *dharmshala*, and many photos of various deities. The *dharmshala* has lodging and boarding facilities for visiting devotees, for which attendants, *sevekarīs*, are engaged. The *mahārāj*, Shyam Bābā, lives in the *dharmashala* with his family.

On entering the temple, visitors first take the *darśan* of the *samādhī* and of the idols of deities, then the *darśan* of Shyam Bābā and others present. When I visited, I saw an old man with a veena around his neck repeatedly chanting god's name; then another man took the veena. Every visitor entering the place was carrying either grains or vegetables, for the *dharmshala*. Some people were placing money in Bābā's hands. To those who did not bring anything, Bābā used to quip tauntingly, 'Didn't anything grow in your field? Man, there is always famine in your place!'

I had a talk with Shyam Bābā about the *vārī*. This is a summary of his views:

Though there are many sects among Vārkarīs, their perspective and aim are the same. Aren't they also many routes to reach Ālaṇḍī? One may take the route that he finds proper and easy. It does not matter whether there are many sects. But it is not right for one sect to abuse the other.

*Dinḍī* has become a money-spinning business. I am telling you this because people tell me so. But don't go and repeat it to everybody.

One who takes part in the *dinḍī* should only take the name of god, who then takes care of you. But people do not forget their personal problems in life. They go on quarrelling. They worry about their families.

A *Vārkarī* is one who strikes [makes a *vār*] and conquers love, anger, lust, temptation, greed, hatred in his mind.

There is no beginning and no end to *vārī*. *Vārī* means to go and come incessantly, like birth and death. *Vārī* has been there from time immemorial. As says the *abhaṅga*, 'Body is *Paṇḍharī*, soul is *Pāṇḍuraṅga*.' *Pāṇḍuraṅga* is life. Without *Pāṇḍuraṅga*, there is only a corpse.' But Vārkarīs carry *Pāṇḍuraṅga* in their heart; they remain alive, because they never forget *Pāṇḍuraṅga*. Others are like

death. Vārkarīs go time and again to Paṇḍharī.... they get there their soul and are reborn to life incessantly. Otherwise, they can obtain life through the name of Pāṇḍuraṅga.

God is everywhere. But the ignorants don't realize it. That is why the *sants* first initiated them to the devotion of Viṭṭhal. Then once people started believing in Viṭṭhal and performing *pujā*, they were taught that god is in human beings. God is everywhere. Then what is the harm in believing that he is also in an idol?

There is no knowledge without a guru.

The last crucial pronouncement is particularly significant to our perspective. It was, moreover, established through four short anecdotal narratives discussed here, typical of the style of *purāṇās*' mythological stories, a mode of exposition characteristic of the preaching practices of *gurus* and *kirtankārs* during the *vārī*, and in the Vārkarī tradition in general:

Nāmdev was such a great *sant* that god used to speak to him directly and take food from his hands. But the experience was only to teach Nāmdev the importance of a guru. In the beginning, he used to ask, 'Where is the need of a guru?' God said, 'Nama, make someone your guru. You will not recognize god without a guru.' Nāmdev said, 'Oh god! I will recognize you in any form.' God smiled and said, 'Look, Namya, you will get deceived!' Nāmdev said, 'Let's see.' God agreed and took on the disguise of a Pathan. The Pathan came to the same road along which Nāmdev was walking. He made towards Nāmdev to beat him. When the latter saw the Pathan rushing towards him, he turned and ran. He entered the temple of *Pāṇḍuraṅga* and god said, 'What happened, Namya?' Nāmdev said that a Pathan was coming to kill him. God laughed and told him that the Pathan was he himself. Nāmdev said, 'Is it so? But god, I am used to seeing you and mother Rukhmini together. I was deceived because you were alone. If you both come together, I will recognize you anywhere.' God agreed.

Nāmdev once went to the plantation of Savata Mali who placed his head on Nāmdev's feet. He was full of humility, but Nāmdev was conceited. Just then a man came. He had a bitch with him. He took the bitch's milk in one pot, made small crumbs of *bhākrī* (millet bread) and put it in the milk. He invited Savata Mali and Nāmdev to have food with him. Savata Mali immediately joined him, and Nāmdev was disgusted with Savata Mali. 'What a dirty fellow this Savata Mali is! He has merrily gone to eat *bhākrī* mixed in the bitch's

milk.' Nāmdev went to god and started telling him about this. God laughed and told him: 'Nama, that bitch was Rukhmini and that man was myself.' Nāmdev said that he was used seeing them both in human form and so he did not think that it could be Rukhmini in a bitch form. But he still insisted he could recognize god, provided they should both come together. God smiled and agreed.

Nāmdev was roaming on the banks of a river. A Dombari couple happened to come there at that time. The Dombari asked his wife what curry she was going to cook that day, and she replied that she had not been able to get either fish or meat that day. The Dombari looked around angrily and spotted Nāmdev. He said, 'Kill that boy and make a curry.' The Dombari woman ran to catch Nāmdev, who started running for his life. He touched god's feet and said, 'I was about to get killed today, god. One Dombari was going to cook me into a curry.' God began to laugh. He said that the Dombari was he himself and the Dombari woman was Rukhmini. So again, Nāmdev was deceived. God said, 'If you had a guru, you would have known immediately.' Nāmdev realized his mistake and decided to take a guru.

Nāmdev was told that his *guru* was in the temple. So he went to the temple of Śiva. There he saw a man sleeping with his feet on the *pinḍā*. Nāmdev became very angry. He lifted the man's feet and put them aside. But when he looked, that *pinḍā* was under the man's feet. The *pinḍā* used to go wherever Nāmdev placed the man's feet. He made that man his guru. His name was Visoba Khechar.

While we were talking, a woman had entered the temple with her husband. Both took *darśan* of god first, then Shyam Bābā's and last of all those present. Her husband said, 'Bābā, she wants to put the *māḷa*' Bābā looked at her and made a sign to her to sit down. She sat down with folded hands, and he asked her name. When she told him it was Manjula, he said to her:

You are very short-tempered. Learn to control your anger. Since when did you stop eating meat? You should not eat meat. You must get up before sunrise, have a bath and offer water to the basil plant. You must repeatedly chant the mantra 'Rāma! Kṛṣṇa Hari!' You must push the bead with the middle finger of your right hand. The bead in the centre is the guru bead. You must give up eating one fruit and one pulse in memory of your guru. One must offer oneself, mind, body and wealth, to the guru.<sup>47</sup>

Her husband was standing there with folded hands, nodding his head at everything. Bābā then asked for the *māḷa* to be brought and placed it around Manjula's neck. She took everybody's *darśan* and gave *prasāda*<sup>48</sup> to all.

## A Complex of Interwoven Scenarios

On the way to Paṇḍharī various social actors play their part. They interfere more than they interact. Their contrasted scenarios become intermingled. To analytically distinguish various communicative figures, we sort them into two opposite sets of four configurations each. This will enable us to finally qualify their overall aggregate.

A first communicative figure concerns the relation of the Vārkarī himself, as an individual, to his god. In this regard, the *vārī* seemingly stages a metaphor in this world of a wish of *samādhī*. All palanquins carry *pādukā* of sants;<sup>49</sup> Vārkarīs walk in the latter's company and, as we said earlier, consider themselves and their thousands of companions as *sants* too. Only one single aim matters, the vision, the *darśan*, of Viṭṭhal. They decorate their body so as to resemble Viṭṭhal, chant his praise and with great affection take his name only as a quest of communion. The *vārī* is prompted by a will to direct communication<sup>50</sup> and hopefully immediate fusion with god at the image of Jñānadev's 'living *samādhī*' and Tukārām's mysterious ascension, the two crucial symbolic representations in the pilgrims' mind of a mystical flight from the world.

A second communicative figure concerns the interaction of Vārkarīs with their partners in the *vārī*, *Viṭṭhal*, their intimate deity, the *sants*, their mentors and the collective of all the Vārkarīs, their companions. In this regard, the *vārī* appears to be a metaphor in this society for alternative forms of human rapport. The time and space of the *vārī* allow for communication practices that, for a while and to a limited but significant extent, tend to overstep a condition of scanty and discriminatory human rapport. The *vārī* breaks with formal communicative constraints and tends to enact a reversal in two main ways or at two levels.

First, Vārkarīs do not forget their sorrow and worries, but can share them in an *aparté*—actually an intimate soliloquy—with a god confidant, the sants in whose company they live and walk for a couple of weeks, and bosom friends among fellow Vārkarīs during the *vārī*

as well as afterwards. The *vārī* does not delete affliction and worldly concerns, but brings a solace apart and aloof from the daily causes of mental pressures and social repression at home and in the village. But, in this respect, it does more than provide a chance for respite and temporary relief. It mainly offers the opportunity of a confidant, which society hardly secures. Bhakti itself as pure reliance and confidence in the deity, stages a symbolic milieu of communication. The end of worldly suffering and frustration is being expected from an external gracious god, who is, all the way, called upon by his name to rush and assist his beloved till he is met and touched in person.

Such practices and representations—above all, god as a mother or an intimate companion—exhibit, at the personal level, an intensely gratifying affective relation (as of a passionate lover to his/her beloved), namely, a tense dialogic structure of attachment and belonging; in other words, a pathetic yearning for wholehearted acceptance and recognition (Poitevin and Rairkar 1996: 236–39). Bhakti is not a religion, but a dramatic appeal for communicative recognition (Deleury 1994: 7; Lokhande and Lang 1976). It is logically—as logos, rhetorical devices on the way to Paṇḍharī—a form of address, which institutes a relation with someone who is expected to listen in a world of loneliness. The Vārkarīs' soliloquy makes sense as an expectation that someone will take notice, respond and establish a rapport—considerate listening, sharing and supporting—otherwise denied in the solitude of this world. Bhakti symbolically establishes such a relation in the imaginary and creates a utopian (de Certeau 1990: 32–35) space of communication.<sup>51</sup>

Second, at the interpersonal and collective level, the relations among members of the *dinḍī* give a foretaste of less discriminatory and confined rapports. A sense of belonging in a world made of realities, affinities and commonalities other than routine chores, domestic duties and family-bound experiences is nurtured by a joyful and festive atmosphere, cooperative attitudes and sharing of tasks and an experience of collective living; the boundaries, assignments and prescriptions of which are not defined by family relations, kinship and alliance systems, and their role ascription, and, above all, the *ringaṇ* experience of a totally unknown collective fusion beyond blood, kinship and caste bondages. Especially to women usually confined to home, the *vārī* offers a milieu of experience—material, relational, cultural, religious—which differs from everyday life. Though they listen to the high-flown language of preachers talking about renunciation of world

desires and pleasures, some will take advantage of the *dinḍī* to prepare dishes of their liking for meals; some have confided that they saved the whole year to contribute the required *bhiśśī* to the *dinḍī* with the purpose of enjoying some time with women friends for fifteen days. That different context and mode of living is actually a 'no man's land' of sorts as regards the daily prescribed routine at home, which prompts to somehow bypass inhibitions and taboos prevailing in normal life, such as those affecting gender relations. All this secures some mental relief and emotional respite, though for a little while, as on returning home the usual rules of discrimination and constraints will prevail as ever in the family and village.

A third communicative figure concerns the relation of Vārkarīs to their immediate social environment. We have described various forms of public recognition: the bustle of local authorities, state functionaries, officials and agencies hastening to stage welcome parties and offer meals, the state of distinction earned by Vārkarīs for their commendable religious performance, the place of honour that Vārkarīs have and the mark of respect that they give one another. With these forms of communication, the *vārī* displays metaphors that symbolically effect a reversal of the state of disregard, exclusion, desertion, marginalization or contempt. In short, the establishment, for once, takes notice of them, and publicly acknowledges and praises their valuable performance. The *vārī*, thus, enacts a reversal of status.

A fourth communicative metaphor is that of *māher* and *māulī*, the meeting and embrace of a godmother, emblems of a haven of peace. This may seem to carry a wish of regression to a state anterior to confrontation with the unwanted harsh reality of this world. Vārkarīs by and large belong to the multitude of those disprivileged and hurt by the adverse alterity of this world. The attempt is here to symbolically delete or bypass the suffering that comes with birth and existence for those thrown into the world as distinct identities just to be exposed to adversities, constraints and painful labour only to survive. The attempt seems to retrieve and live in the primordial, protected prenatal state in the maternal womb.

Two processes may be noted in this respect. One is a kind of retreat from this world into a place of repose of sorts: during the *vārī*, Vārkarīs are looked after, surrounded, guided, wrapped up as it were and carried day and night by the collective life of their *dinḍī*, to which they belong totally. Care is taken that they do not depart, and are recalled,

if needed, by the *copdār*. Everything is planned and arranged so that no worry disturbs them and prevents them from concentrating on ‘the name’ alone. Then starts the second inwards process of involution with the constant fixation on *māulī*, a travelling back towards a primeval state beyond distress, labours of identity and fight for survival. The enthralling effect of the ceremonial and rhythmic acclamations ‘Dnyanoba *māulī* Tukārām’ made in the *ringaṇ* forcefully recreates that mental state of fusion, whereby overcoming the pain of nonviable individual existence, and making one transcend the discriminatory differentiations stamped at birth on all human beings.

These four basic communicative configurations operate at four levels that only the analysis distinguishes. Semantically, they are analogous and redundant. We may construe their overall import as establishing at the time of the *vārī*, a utopia—an imaginary island of happiness—with the wanted attributes of a gratifying realm of pleasure, distinction, prosperity, recognition and fusion. In this regard, we cannot but stress the fact of a tremendous semantic discrepancy between the preachers’ discourse of renunciation to pleasures and in general of the disregard for and possibly desertion of worldly life,<sup>52</sup> *saṁsāra*, and the urge of worldly gratification and life in plenty that Vārkarīs eagerly expect *Viṭṭhal* and the ‘horse of honour’ to grant them. Two overall intentions run parallel and can never meet. Once the *vārī* is over, the experience remains, in harsh times a source of sweet memories, as evidenced in the tradition of grindmill songs (Poitevin and Rairkar 1996: 153–66) and pilgrims’ testimonies. The *vārī* secures success and relief amidst sorrow and adversity for the coming year till the next *vārī*.<sup>53</sup>

The island of Utopia, a splendid realm, proves in fact to be a ‘trapped ideal’ (Paquot 1996). Utopia is literally a ‘no-lace’. That ‘no man’s land’, an ‘elsewhere’ that stands ‘nowhere’, cannot even on the way itself to Paṇḍharī escape the control of four established communication set-ups.

The caste system is the first figure to encroach on the whole territory of Utopia. The widely circulated pronouncement that caste discrimination has disappeared within or because of the Vārkarī sect holds little ground. Caste rules significantly pattern the relations between *dinḍīs*: as each caste has its *sant* or holy man emblematic of its social and cultural identification, it is but natural for *dinḍīs* to assert their distinctiveness and even tend towards separate identities on the basis of caste *sants*, such as, for example, Rohidas Cambhar

and Savata Mali. Though it is said that Vārkarīs do not observe rules of untouchability, in some *dinḍīs* meals are also served in different rows as in the village. I have pointed in this respect to the contrast of external relaxation of behavioural customs and permanent mental contempt concerning Untouchables, which, to my experience, is in no way altered. The cooking in the *dinḍīs* is entrusted to cooks of any caste, but actually one would never find in the main *dinḍīs* people from the Untouchable castes busy with food preparation; similarly, in the *dinḍīs* of Untouchable castes, no other caste will be represented.

Most of the *sants* are referred to by the mention of their caste—a caste of lower status. For example, Gora Kumbhar, Cokha Mahar, and so on. But Jñānadev and his brothers and sister, Eknāth, Nilobaraya, Brahman *sants*, are not referred to with to their caste attribute, as if they were the only ones to reach a level of universal sanctity or relevance. Dnyanadev besides, or rather similarly to Viṭṭhal himself, is the only one to enjoy the outstanding privilege of being called *māuli*, which equates him to god. The subtle and subdued trend towards brushing aside Nāmdev, the tailor, while projecting Dnyanadev, the highly literate Brahman, to the fore has been noticed. In the stereotyped list ‘Nivṛtti, Jñānadev, Sopān, Mukṭābāi, Eknāth, Nāmdev, Tukārām’, the first five are Brahmans. The name of Nāmdev, the Shimpī, comes in sixth position, and Tukārām was a Kunbi, a Śūdra, a man of lowest birth. *Sants* like Cokhoba, Goroba, Narahari, Savata, etc., though contemporaries of Dnyanadev but of mean descent are much less remembered.

Badve, the priests who perform Viṭṭhal’s *pujā* at Paṇḍharpūr are Brahman by caste. The stories of their atrocities in the past are known: they harassed *sants* like Chokhamela, the Mahar, Nāmdev, the Shimpī, Janabai, the woman orphan, and Nāmdev’s *dāsī*, his servant, etc. It is well known that Untouchables for centuries were allowed to worship Viṭṭhal only from outside the temple, and that *sant* Chokhamela had his *samādhī* in front of the temple entry. Only recently have they been allowed inside with everybody for Viṭṭhal’s *darśan*. But this is due to pressure from external secular forces, and not to dynamics from within the Vārkarī sect. All over Maharashtra movements for free temple entry to all were launched by renowned social reformists, from the respected Hindu Mahasabha leader V.D. Sawarkar, a Brahman, whose aim was to unite all divided Hindu communities, to the campaign led in the 1930s

by B.R. Ambedkar, the radical leader of the national movement for the overall liberation of Untouchables (Ambedkar 1990, 1998). But the final successful blow was given by the renowned freedom fighter and social reformer Sane Guruji. After a wide crusade in western Maharashtra, he resolutely made up his mind to undertake a fast unto death at Paṇḍharpūr itself for the opening of Vithobā's temple to all. The fast started on 1 May 1947 and was reluctantly broken on 10 May when Mawalankar, Speaker of Bombay Legislative Assembly, intervened with a promise that the Bombay government would get a law passed for free entry to temples for all. Two months later, the law was passed and a ceremony was arranged for Untouchables to enter Vithobā's temple. Though invited, Sane Guruji refused to come, wishing rather that temple priests had changed their attitudes voluntarily, enforcement by law not being an adequate means to change social practices.

Today, since they are indiscriminately allowed in the cellar itself, Untouchables and a number of lowest castes cannot but, in the eyes of Badve priests, pollute Viṭṭhal. The god becomes *ovaḷe* Brahma, 'sullied Brahma', and is to be ritually purified again every year. To this effect, one of the two strings of basil beads that adorn the idol of Viṣṇu in the 'pure Brahma', *sovaḷe* Brahma, Vedo Narayan temple, at Valawal (*taluka Kuḍāl*, district Sindhudurga in Konkan, about 500 km from Paṇḍharpūr), was sent by post (previously a Brahman was especially dispatched to fetch it) and placed on the idol of Viṭṭhal<sup>54</sup> on the *ekādaśī* of Māgha. That day, the god is dressed in new clothes, a *pujā* is performed, and for twenty-four hours nobody is allowed to visit Vithobā (Dhere 1984: 273).

In a protest meeting against atrocities on Untouchables organized in Pune on the occasion of a visit of the Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, on 24 July 1977, a man called Gaykvad, from the Dhor-Camar (Harale Vaishnava) Untouchable community denounced three discriminatory practices observed by the Vārkarī sect. The educational institute in Ālāndī that trains *kirtankārs* for the *vārī* makes Untouchable students sit in a separate row for meals. The latter, moreover, are not allowed to sit with the veena in hand on the Nārad mattress in turn with other students. As each one has to bow down in front of the colleague who leaves the seat before taking from him the veena, the other students would have to bow in front of the Untouchables, which is not acceptable to them. In the Dnyanadev *pālkhī* procession, Untouchable *dindīs* are

placed ahead of the 'horse of honour'; they are excluded from the *vārī*. An Untouchable student who dared to sit in the same row for meal was beaten; he went and lodged a complaint to the police (Kalebere 1977).

This latter incident prompted social reformers and activists to hold discussions with the religious heads of the Vārkarī sect in Pune and Ālandī, till a compromise was reached. Enraged, upper-caste students beat up again the companion who had complained, but the latter was himself arrested and handcuffed when he went to the police to lodge a fresh complaint. Regarding the place of Untouchables in the procession, demonstrators went and stopped the horse of the Dnyanadev *pālkhī* at Ālandī, claiming justice for the *dinḍīs* of Untouchables, but Marāthā wrestlers beat the demonstrators. Police intervened and beat up the demonstrators, too. Only the collector put an end to the quarrel by declaring that all *dinḍīs* would henceforth have to follow the horse. In retaliation, the school for *kirtankārs* bypassed the issue by abolishing meals and use of mattress (Awachat 1978).

Gender discrimination is a second communicative constraint. This is obvious in the division of roles and functions invested with religious authority. There is not a single woman among the trustees of the religious institutions that control the *vārī*. There is not a single woman among the students of the Vārkarī education institutions that train the preachers (HBP). I have never seen a woman among the veena players, and the leaders of *dinḍīs* and *a fortiori* of *pālkhīs*. Authorized *kirtankārs*, *purohits* or *pujāris* are similarly always men. Though a few women are seen imparting *kirtans*, they do it without official recognition, and no woman would be assigned the 'honour' of delivering a *kirtan* in front of a *pālkhī*. Women may be entrusted with cooking tasks and other menial services, but even then the head cook will be a man. The task of carrying water on their head is traditionally assigned to women only. Binding norms of impurity regarding menstruation incapacitates woman from carrying the basil. Women Vārkarīs are not allowed to help cooking when in their menses.

A third communicative constraint is that the various levels of power set-ups—religious, political, managerial, social, cultural—are in the hands of highest castes, mainly Brahmans and the upper strata of Marāmhās—members of the former 'houses' (*gharāne*) of the landed aristocracy. They form the *panch* committee of each *pālkhī*. For instance, the More family, from the Marāthā caste, controls the Dehu temple religious

institution, where the trustees are all Marāthā, and the Tukārām *pālkhī*, also forming its *panch* committee. As former *vatandars* (holders of hereditary estate and rights in land), they are well-off farmers. They, moreover, claim to be the descendants, heirs and repositories of Tukārām's heritage. If we take the example of Dnyanadev *pālkhī*, it is the Brahmans who have the upper hand over the Ālāndī temple religious institution, and over the *panch* committee of Dnyanadev *pālkhī*. But the latter 'belongs' to a descendant of a Marāthā house, Arphalkar, its *mālāk*, while the word of the Marāthā Sardar Shitole is final, as we mentioned earlier, when the *panch* committee holds sessions.

This gives a hint, on the one hand, of the significant distinction to be made between 'political power', which is in the hands of upper layers of Marāthās, and 'ideological power' (religious, cultural and ritual), which remains in the hands of Brahmans. The political power, as we have seen earlier with Sardar Shitole, speaks the language, acknowledges and advocates the supremacy of the Brahmanical tradition of Bhāgavat *dharma* (Ranade 1988) in western Maharashtra, but also 'own' the *pālkhīs* and through the *panch* committees control the leaders of *dinḍīs*. This indicates, on the other hand, the socio-cultural competition between heirs of a Kshatriya and a Brahman tradition: the Sardar perceives and shapes his *pālkhī* at the image of a triumphant military procession, while the Brahmans try to spread the Vedic or Karmakāṇḍ<sup>55</sup> tradition by being in a majority in the religious institutions of Ālāndī and Paṇḍharpūr, and in particular the prominent Dnyanadev *pālkhī*.

Traditional customary rights, expertise in religious knowledge, the service, *sevā*, in other words, the management of the *vārī*, are significant sources of power. The *vārī* invests the *mālaks* of *dinḍīs* and *pālkhīs* with a power status by virtue of a right to inherit this privilege vested as an honour (*mān*) in his family, and, moreover, by permission or sanction of the *panch* committee. *Purohīts* (religious servants) or ministrants of the main rituals are Brahmans, who are appointed to this service by the Panch Committee. The 'honour of giving kirtans' is similarly decided by the *panch* committees, which manages the whole planning of religious functions. Dates, times and places are announced and published in the press, with names of the religious functionaries appointed as *mānkarīs*, holders of these honours. It is indeed a matter of prestige to be officially appointed by a *panch* committee to deliver

*bhajans* and *kirtans* for huge crowds of devotees. This *kirtankār* honour is then likely to become a kind of customary appointment and then a hereditary privilege in a family.

In fact, such terms as ‘authority’, ‘right’, ‘sanction’, ‘permission’, ‘appointment’ and ‘decision’ that we have descriptively used would now analytically appear absolutely wrong. One should on no account understand them with reference to a formal, modern and democratic power set-up. The *panch* committee does not ‘appoint’ a *kirtankār* as it is ‘bound’ to recognize, for instance, the traditional or customary ‘honour’ of given main *kirtankārs* to deliver the most prestigious *kirtans*. The same goes with the ‘appointment’ of *mālaks* of *dinḍīs*. Sometimes the committee may actually authorize the *mālaks* of new *dinḍīs*; these *mālaks* will then take up the coveted ‘honour’ as a social asset meant to retain a hereditary privilege in their family. This explains the fact that the committee stands indolent in front of practices such as the multiplication of *dinḍīs* under the same number and the purchase of *dinḍīs*. It is ‘powerless’ or deprived of ‘authority’ in front of competitive games and struggles for appropriating prestigious hereditary privileges. Power relations operate in the *vārī* along lines of mutual co-optation, reciprocal dependency and hereditary privileges or ‘honours’. The *panch* is actually deprived of the real power to make autonomous decisions in front of networks of traditional, hereditary ‘honours’. It only looks after matters of practical adjustment of time-tables and agendas in conformity with the feudal system of hereditary ‘honours’ and ‘rights to serve’ (*sevecā hakka*). It stands to preside over and administer them.

The fourth constraining communicative set-up is the *Karmakāṇḍ* tradition that is deliberately propagated and sought to be imbibed in Vārkarīs’ mind by preachers and gurus. Traditional vehicles carry that attempt: the importance given to holy books and their pious reading on *ekādaśī*; the frequent reference to puranic mythological stories; a host of abstract terms and philosophical notions that confuse devotees with heavy-worded sentences; a subtle way of playing with words and people’s emotions; sweet talking to allure them, firm assertions to convince, definite assurances to secure, etc., all skills otherwise known to commercial representatives or ‘a mischievous wolf’, to quote the expression of their critics.

The Brahmanic and Vedic ascendancy is also strengthened by advocating the importance of such observances as fasts, vegetarian

and teetotal diets, taboos on onions, garlicks and turnips (supposed aphrodisiacs), and so on, as antidote for vices. One is exhorted to lead a simple life, restricting one's needs to the maximum possible extent, and fully controlling all senses, the mind and emotions by eschewing, for instance, from tasty food as it makes people fickle, greedy and addicted to vices. The *mālkarī* with his string of beads is put up as a model. One is also invited to observe traditional religious rituals inherited from ancestors, attend *kirtan*, *bhajan*, *pravacan*, etc., puranic stories are recalled, which extol utmost repressive attitudes and behaviour.

To obtain an unconditional assent, some principles are forcefully propounded: one should have a guru and submit to him 'in body, mind and wealth'; one should never raise questions especially in a *kirtan*, but have full faith; one should respect the traditions of elders, and docilely abide by norms and rules of life inherited from ancestors. This repressive teaching is likely to make devotees physically inactive, mentally dumb and socially apathetic, and result in effectively maintaining the oppressive hold of all sorts of established leaders and forms of power upon common people.

In the tradition of sants, Tukārām is the most popular opponent of this *Karmakāṇḍ* tradition. He bluntly denounced preachers of *kirtans* and *pravacans* who turn their *sevā*—in his view a fully disinterested or voluntary service to be undertaken after one has looked after his family and attended one's professional duties—into a mere commercial business as any other employment or trade meant to maintain one's family and status (Tukārām 1973: 516, *abhaṅga* no. 3084). Today *kirtankārs* are used to demanding a remuneration for their *kirtan* as per rates that they themselves fix on the basis of their prestige and skill to pull crowds, the amount reaching a maximum of Rs 25,000 per *kirtan* when it is a prestigious preacher like Bābā Mahārāj Satarkar, plus transport, meals and other sundry expenses.

Tukārām was against giving so much of unwarranted importance to *gurus*, whom he ridicules for their farcical outlook (Tukārām 1983: 294, no. 790). He himself refused to be identified as a *guru* by any disciple. '[S]ādhūs are tartuffes, they smear their body with ashes and close their eyes to sin, they enjoy the pleasures of this world under the camouflage of discourses on renunciation, damn their company!' (Tukārām 1973: 704, no. 4310). Tukārām directs similar violent diatribes against the ritual power of priests 'worthy of hell', who deceive people 'to fill up their stomach', and such practices as fasts and trance (*ibid.*: 54, no. 329).

A genuine *bhakta* is one whose ‘mind is pure and conduct friendly’, and who conforms his deeds to his words. Any more signs of holiness such as *bukkā*, *māḷa*, saffron dress, cap, basil string, observances, etc., are hypocrisy. The true *sādhū* is the one who identifies with the weak and destitute, the oppressed and deprived, those who labour and suffer, and attends to them.

## A Configuration Sealed from Within

We are now in a position to perceive the texture of the whole social fabric that these contrasted configurations exhibit. The scene on the way to *Paṇḍharī* shows a culture contest. Three main collective social actors display their strategies. Two of them successfully manage to establish their ascendancy over the field occupied by the third one. The *vārī* presents itself as a subsystem of communication blocked from within by the structural interlocking of its elements.

Invoking and acting as heirs and carriers of Vedic tradition high-caste Brahmans display an array of means to invest the whole stage. They imprint Vārkarīs’ minds with a Brahmanic version of what they claim to be *bhakti* since the Vedic period. The version is projected under the catchword of Bhāgavat *dharma* as the authorized and unitary tradition of Maharashtra *sants* since the thirteenth century. A number of other minor actors vie with that Vaishnava tradition and with one another to similarly mould the pilgrims’ minds and feelings as per their own sectarian persuasion. These social actors operate through educational and ritual forms of transmission and control. A strategy of propaganda aims at ideological supremacy. Their approach is basically an aggressive encroachment as they want to capture minds and shape attitudes and conducts.<sup>56</sup>

The second category of social actors operate through feudal forms of social rapports. These actors are the social and political heirs of local landlords or chieftains vested with rights in land. They represent the dominant upper strata of the Marāthās. In the ideological classificatory framework they are labelled as Kshatriya, of which they display the military paraphernalia in the Vārkarīs’ procession to *Paṇḍharī*. For generations and centuries, they have invested in the *vārī* by providing the whole performance with a sustainable relational infrastructure, order, discipline, management and decorum. The remarkable permanence,

cohesion and growth of the *vārī* over centuries and through the hazards of history is due to the outstanding rapport of service, *sevā*, maintained by Marāthā chieftains and local landed aristocracy with the *vārī*. The idiom of *sevā* is for this actor a collective strategy of social ascendancy and political dominance. The *vārī* owes its vitality in modern times to this altogether feudal structure and control.

The third actor is the Maharashtrian rural folk, the people of the land. They attend the *vārī* on their own and for their own sake. They are pushed by internal compulsions and the urge of pressing human needs. To reach their ends, they deploy a symbolic strategy; they construct the *vārī* as a utopia by staging communicative conducts of reversal. *Bhakti*—intense form of affective attachment—is the communicational mode that renders operative all the means, religious or otherwise, devised by their creative imagination. Religious forms are only privileged idioms of the dynamics of *bhakti*; they are not its substance. Two prominent spaces stand out as landmarks in this island of utopia as the most effective assets of its imaginary emergence upon the worries and suffering of this world: the *ringaṇ* with the sight of the ‘horse of honour’ mounted by god, storming a number of circles of plenitude, harbinger of life in plenty, and Paṇḍharī, ‘maternal home’, with the vision and possibly embrace of Viṭṭhal, god-mother, assurance of salvific love in a world of destitution, hardship and grief. Utopia is a land that fulfils the wishes of the deprived and aggrieved, granting Vārkarīs what they ultimately look for, gratification and bliss, in a trance-like moment of ecstasy.

To sum up, we have a scenario in which each collective actor feels gratified as he earns what he is striving after. No signs of frustration whatsoever. The satisfaction of the three of them secures for the *vārī* as social configuration a state of equilibrium in the present and a guarantee of permanence in the future as in the past. We have, therefore, a subsystem of communication with no internal tension or conflict between the collective actors. Apparently, there is no winner or loser, and thus no rupture of continuity or crisis along the centuries.

Faith is the core of the system, as attachment or binding, its single foundation value, the cement holding all actors together, though with different connotations as per various types of ascendancy and dependancy: devotional trust as confident reliance on god, feudal loyalty as social–political allegiance to *mālaks*, submissive compliance

as surrender to gurus. Faith is the bolt that interlocks the actors and gives the system a constraining structural fixity. This is the secret of its resilience over centuries.

As a result, the third actor, a weak player in the scenario, cannot but remain locked to the other actors of the drama—god, *mālak* and *guru*—by its very deprivation and powerlessness. This link is sealed up by the *guru* with a number of stamps such as destiny (*naśib*), sin (*pāp*) and stock (*saṁcit*) of merits and demerits (*puṇya*) from earlier lives to be experienced (*bhog*), impurity (*viṭāl*), renunciation (*tyāg*), mental contempt for worldly life, sacrifice (*yajña*) and, to crown it all, obedience to guru, ‘mind, body and riches’. This is the keystone of that subsystem of communication.

As a consequence, the third actor’s utopia cannot but be and remain a mere ‘utopia’, a ‘no-place’, an ‘ecstasy’, a mesmerizing experience that stands *out* off this world. Once the *vārī* is over, we do not see Vārkarīs fighting to bring down in their life here below the substance of their utopian dreams. Here is the end of a truncated performance.

Ultimately, the first and second actors succeed in bringing back the third partner to its state of subordination and deprivation, though with a significant difference, namely, henceforth pacified, somehow rid of angers and frustrations, and comforted in subjection. On the way to Paṇḍharī, the third actor possibly lost human worldly consciousness; we may see him as a leper happily doomed to insensibility. This is the structural sense of the *vārī* as the social and cultural life of Maharashtrian society.

## Notes

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1. Paṇḍharpūr (district Solapur, western Maharashtra) is known as Paṇḍharī to the pilgrims, who worship in its temple (erected in 1189) with a particularly intense emotional attachment the god of the Bhakti *sampradāya* (tradition), Vīṁhobā.

On the religious movement of Bhakti, its history, concept and controversies, see Bhattacharya (1989), Eck and Mallison (1991), Hardy (1983), Lele (1981), Lorenzen (1996), Pande (1982), Poitevin and Rairkar (1996), Schomer and McLeod (1987), Sharma (1987) and Zelliott (1976). Bhakti in north India has been divided in two major streams: *nirguṇī* (‘without attributes’) and *saguṇī* (‘with attributes’) on the basis of a theological difference in the way of

conceptualizing the nature of the divine being; on the ideological, social and historical significance of that difference, see Lorenzen (1996: 1–2, 13–21).

2. Jñānadev or Jñāneśvar, or Dnyaneshwar, Dnyanadev, Dnyanoba or Dnyanba (1275–96), a poet-philosopher from Ālaṇḍī near Pune, is recognized as the founder of the Vārkarī *panth* (sect), as his writings lay the foundation of Maharashtrian Bhakti movement, particularly his Jñāneśvarī, a commentary in verses (c. 1290) on the Bhagvad Gita (famous dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, a part of the *Bhīṣmaparvan* of the Mahabharata), one of the fundamental ideological references of the Vārkarī movement, and no less significantly the first impressive literary monument of Marāṭhī as a regional language: for a translation with introduction, see Bhagwat (1954).

Tukārām (1608–1649), a Vāṇī by caste, a Śūdra (lowest) by status, from Dehu near Pune. On him and the family of *sant* poets of the Bhakti tradition in western Maharashtra, see S.D. Chitre (1991) and Pendse (1972). On the whole tradition of *sants*, see Abbott and Godbole (1998) and Ranade (1988).

3. A *sant* is literally a ‘holy man’. In the Guru Granth tradition, Vaishnavas as a whole are presented as holy men, and opposed to the despicable Shāktas; in northern India and Maharashtra Vaishnava devotees or *bhaktas* ‘worshipping a unique supreme God and opposed to caste distinction or at least very liberal on matters of caste, are generally called “*sants*”’ (Vaudeville 1997: 36–37). For Deleury (1994: 222): ‘T[he technical term among the *bhaktas* to call a holy man after he has taken *samādhi*, or even during his life time.’ According to Hess and Singh (1986: xii), in the vocabulary of Kabir (1398–1448), the foremost of all *sants*, it may mean ‘ascetic, renunciant, or simply religious person’. In common parlance, it may refer to someone who distinguishes himself by outstanding religious performances, and be loosely appropriated for a revered ‘religious’ man, a *guru* or a *swāmi*, a preacher or *kirtankār*, and even for Bhakti devotees or *bhaktas*, such as the Vārkarīs on their way to Paṇḍharpūr. Kabir, with ‘a sense of pervasive irony’, constantly addresses us as *sants*; the Sanskrit root *sat* meaning ‘truth’, a *sant* could therefore mean a ‘seeker of truth’ (ibid.), if one goes by etymology. We have regularly kept the *Marāṭhī* term on account of its ambivalences to avoid a wrong equation with the English ‘saint’.
4. *Māulī*, literally ‘mother’, is the usual attribute of Dnyaneshwar and its Jñāneśvarī, as well as of Viṭhobā, as we shall see.
5. It is obvious that a comprehensive study would not ignore the historical development, theological discourses, philosophical issues and institutional settings, which our specific methodological approach knowingly leaves aside. See Deleury (1994) for the needed relevant Marāṭhī sources.
6. This leaves aside other methodological approaches, which could and should be pursued independently as they would use other analytical tools and construct different scientific objects, such as psychoanalytic and psychosocial approaches, or the usual way specific to the constituency of science of

religion, which considers the *vārī* as a substantive religious performance or discourse. Our social science approach takes a structural shot.

7. Let us refer to the principle of ambivalence applying to the study of the content of cultural artefacts, stated by Denis-Constant Martin as a rule for scholars of culture (see chapter 17 of this volume). No wonder that in a social phenomenon of the first magnitude as the *vārī*, we shall come across innumerable ambivalences at a number of levels: with regard to various forms of power and dominance, symbolic artefacts, concepts, rituals, daily practices, observances, etc. This is what we like to conceptualize as implosion, a pervading inner dynamics of the *vārī*. We could have reconstructed its totality with focus on that internal semantic multiplicity. We would then have ended up with a fan-shaped reconstruction. We preferred in this study to focus instead on the power system that ultimately structures the whole configuration, and keeps tightly locked and shrewdly wrapped in its folds all sorts of implosive processes, eschewing as a result, any possibility of explosion.
8. Each *ekādaśī*, the eleventh day of lunar months, whether in the bright or dark half of the month, is a day of observance in the Bhakti cult, but the four bright *ekādaśī* of the months of Āṣāḍh, Kārtikī, Māgha and Caitra assume a particular importance, and mainly among them Āṣāḍh *ekādaśī*—which we present here—when hundreds of *pālkhīs* of *sants* take the road to Pañḍharpūr for that eminently auspicious day, attracting particularly huge crowds to accompany them, and to Ālaṇḍī, though without *pālkhīs*, on Kārtikī *ekādaśī*, which commemorates the *samādhī* of Dnyaneshwar.

Ālaṇḍī is a place renowned also for its religious educational institutions like the Varkari Sampradaya Vidyalaya and Kirtan Mahavidyalaya, which train preachers who address Vārkarīs and Bhakti devotees; a number of *dharmashalas* and *ashrams* belonging to different castes, workers' associations or unions, and gurus of various ideological allegiance are there to host them.

*Samādhī* is the absorption of a devotee in his god when he dies, hence the memorial (stone) set up where he died. The 'living *samādhī*' of Dnyaneshwar (1275–96) is so named as he did not die, but passed away alive into his god.

9. The term Dalit literally means 'oppressed' and specifically designates those social segments of Indian society that are culturally, socially and physically repressed by dominant sections, and maintained by virtue of a traditional, iniquitous and hierarchical socio-cultural dispensation in a subhuman state of subservient subalternity called 'untouchability'. We here use the term in a wider sense, which makes it apply by priority but not exclusively to the Untouchable castes, as an extended anthropological and sociological definition of what Ambedkar (1998, Vol. 7: 25, 31–32) refers to with the word *bahiśkṛt* (literally, ostracized, 'a kind of life condition that characterises the exploitation, suppression and marginalisation of *Dalit* people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes')

Brahmanical ideology' (Ambedkar 1990: 204); or '*Pad Dalit*, those crushed under the feet of the Hindu system'. In the complexity of the everyday web of personal relationships multifarious are the types of ostracism by which some human beings expel others from their human constituency, denying them a right to the plenitude of humanity.

10. The representations and feelings characteristic of the relation entertained by the women singers with Vimmhal goes even beyond the symbolic import of *māher*; intimate friendship and erotic connotations are also explicit (see Poitevin and Rairkar 1996: 153–66). This significantly reinforces the argument made here of Paṇḍharī as a symbol of pleasure and gratification.
11. It is only in 1873 that the Brahman priests, the Badve, in charge of the temple prohibited and discontinued the traditional practice prevailing since centuries of actually embracing the idol of Viṭhobā as one's mother, out of fear that somebody, namely, an Untouchable or an impure devotee such as a woman in her menses, might secretly, unknowingly or stealthily outwit them and pollute the god. The ban on temple entry as well as many purity rituals were strictly observed for reasons of 'pollution' (Dhere 1984: 273–76). Someone daring to transgress the rule was beaten up, like the *sant* Cokamela. Once I saw an old woman trying to embrace Viṭhobā as did generations of devotees, but the priests were disapproving and stopped her.
12. Two religious practices, *bhajan*, consisting in singing poetic compositions such as *abhaṅgas* and other hymns, to the rhythmic accompaniment of an instrument, usually cymbals, while *kirtan* consists of a speech given by a preacher, a *kirtankār*, to an audience of Bhaktas, followers of the Bhakti tradition, interspersed now and then with the singing of pious hymns or verses bearing upon the same topic, and *purāṇic* stories and myths.
13. In each village leaders or notable families' bullocks conspicuously share the respect and prestige of their masters; the latter may even in such circumstances make a point to guide them personally, proudly sitting in the chariot of the *pālkhī*, close to the god or *sant*, and directing it towards the village, with the permission of the president of the *pālkhī*. These bullocks, generally of a prestigious Khillari breed, may even have been purposively bought to be shown and displayed at that time and other significant public events such as a regional bullocks' race or village festivals.
14. *Dakṣinā*: money or present voluntarily offered against a religious service, participation in a religious function or on similar occasions.
15. *Darśan*: literally, 'sight' of god; it refers to stopping in front of a sacred image for a while to show respect. *Āratī*: a ritual consisting of waving a burning lamp in front of a statue while chanting a psalmody; may also be done to honour a person.
16. This caustic remark and the following ones are often made by preachers, *kirtankārs* and *tamāśā* comedians to mean that nobody comes with an attitude of unconcern, and that a person does not become a gentleman just

by putting a *māḷa*: ‘One who partakes in the *vārī* is a Vārkarī, one who wears a *māḷa* is a *māḷkarī*, one who plays cymbals, *tāḷa*, is a *tāḷakarī*, and one who wears a *māḷa* and creates quarrels, is a *ghoḷkarī*.’ ‘A *māḷkarī* is a *ghoḷkarī*,’ meaning that he is a glutton and a womanizer. ‘Vārkarī, A *māḷkarī* and *ghoḷkarī* are the same,’ is a sarcastic quip from the common man. This points to the fact that people may join the *vārī* with a number of vested interests, from ascetics seeking pleasure and sex, to devotees fulfilling a vow, or the needy and the sick in search of spiritual glory.

17. As a matter of fact, many Vārkarīs are addicted to tobacco, some to drugs (opium or *ganja*).
18. To be without a guru ‘is disreputable in India’ (Vaudeville 1997: 37). The importance of the *gurumantra* and *māḷa* is particularly central in the Nāth tradition, which reached the Deccan by the end of the thirteenth century, the Nāth *panthīs* being, above all, ‘fervent adepts of *guruvād*, the religion of the guru’ (ibid.: 73–78, 98; also see Briggs 1998). Jñāneśvar himself claims to be the spiritual descendant of their founder, Goraknāth.
19. For a comprehensive study of the *Haripāṭh* of Jñāndev, see Vaudeville (1969).
20. Darekarbai claims to be recognized as a *sant* by the Vārkarī companions of her group, the members of which know her as an aggressive, loud-mouthed woman. In the *vārī* she moves around with Untouchable women and may address them, but as other Marāthā women, she actually entertains only contempt for them and does not hide her real feelings, as ‘they are dirty-minded and eat rotten meat’.
21. On the tradition of *sants* and *sant* poets of Bhakti, see Abbott and Godbole (1988) and Schomer and McLeod (1987).
22. Hindu festival occurring on the tenth bright day of the month of Āśvin (September–October).
23. In the 1970s, under the title ‘Bhāgavat Dharma of Maharashtra’, a collection of books was published by Continental Prakashan, Pune, to actually present all the main sources and *sants* of the religious culture and literature of Maharashtra. Among them is a book by S.D. Pendse, a professor of *Marāṭhī* considered a specialist of the *sant* literature, according to whom the main characteristic of Vedic tradition is *bhakti*, and Bhāgavat *dharma* is its developed form; the Bhagvad Gita is its main source and Kṛṣṇa its main deity. ‘This is how it is apprehended by all Marāthī *sants* and Sanskrit *puranic* literature.’ Its specific practices are fast on every *ekādaśī*, *bhajan*, *kirtan* and *jāgaran* (Pendse 1972: 10, 134).
24. *Rājasūya*: sacrificial ritual possibly performed every year in the Vedic times with the purpose of regenerating the power of the king, during which milk, honey, butter, etc. were sprinkled upon him. Meanwhile, a horse, emblem of royal sovereignty and power, was sent to move freely in the whole kingdom, followed by soldiers to guard it, as a sign and claim of the king’s supremacy upon the territory that the horse was covering, till

someone would try to stop the royal animal as a challenge to the will of dominance and expansion of his master; a contest and war of conquest might ensue.

25. See map in Deleury (1994: 77).
26. A notable *sant* and poet of the Bhakti movement in western Maharashtra, Nāmdev was a Shimpī (tailor) who settled at the outskirts of Paṇḍharpūr.
27. A Brahman from Paiṭhan, a main Vārkarī poet and authority; unlike many *sants*, who were wandering holy men, *sādhus* or *sanyāsīs*, he lived an ascetic life in the midst of his family, and preached an alternative model of Bhakti for the common man. He brought out a critical edition of *Jñāneśvarī*, published a large number of books, and translated into *Marāṭhī* important Sanskrit works and *purāṇic* texts.
28. According to official estimate of the police, they were 900,000 in July 1999.
29. Vedānta, Bhagvad Gīta, *Jñāneśvarī*, Eknthā Bhgavatī, and *Tukārām Gāthā* are considered the main references.
30. Among the many popular dance and play forms, and familiar literary forms usually sung or practised to the accompaniment of mimes, sketches, dramatic expression and dancing, are the following: *abhaṅga*, *bhajan*, *bhāruḍ*, *dhāvā*, *gaṭṭaṇ*, *haripāṭh*, *hututu*, *jhimṃā*, *jośī*, *kaḍaklakṣmī*, *ovī*, *pāṅgul*, *phugaḍī*, *piṅgā*, *vāsudev* and *virahañī*.
31. Commonly these practices are: vow to fast on *ekādaśī*, regular pilgrimage during Āṣāḍh and Kārtikī, wearing a string of basil beads, displaying on the forehead a paste of sandalwood *gopīcandan*, daily *pujā* to Pandurang, daily reciting of the *Haripāṭh*, regular reading of the *Jñāneśvarī*, watering the domestic basil, learning by heart the reference sources mentioned, repeating 108 invocations to ‘Ram-Krishna’, speaking only the truth, a pledge of non violence (never hurt through words the feelings of anybody, even a bandit’s; never physically hurt anyone; never think badly of anyone), consider all women besides one’s spouse to be ‘Mother Rukhmini’ and entertain no bad intentions about them, do not drink alcohol or eat meat, look after the company of saintly people, and so on.
32. In the press we regularly read complaints about the Paṇḍharpūr Nagar Pālikā (town council) being reluctant to make the required arrangements despite exceptional government grants sanctioned for this purpose. Moreover, in spite of the income of the Viṭṭhal Devasthān (The religious institution that manages all temple affairs and receives offerings from pilgrims) being quite substantial, it appears to common citizens that no special efforts are being made for maintaining a clean and decent city environment. The debate on the income of the Viṭṭhal Devasthān continues to be a matter of ongoing controversy.
33. Literally, ‘Great *pujā*’, a *pujā* being the most common and popular form of Hindu worship, consisting of bathing, feeding with offerings of eatables, etc. to an idol or a god’s image.

34. The following Marāṭhī statements are heard in such circumstances from the local population to mean that religion is here practised to cover up one's usual misbehaviour: 'They have indulged in all types of crimes, now they rush to practise religion,' which means they try to wash their sins before misbehaving again; or: 'First kick purposefully, then bow down at his feet [to ask pardon].'
35. For instance, the *panch* committee that looks after the Dnyanadev *pāḷkhī* of Āḷaṇḍī was created as early as 1852 by the British administration. In 1830 a dispute arose about the legitimate depositories and heirs of the right 'honour and authority' to manage the religious institution in charge of the administration and service of the temple of Dehu, with all the privileges attached to it. Haibatbaba Arphalkar from a Sardar house, launched an independent *pāḷkhī* under the name of Tukārām, the *sant* of Dehu, breaking with the Dnyanadev *pāḷkhī*, when until that time a single *pāḷkhī* jsed formed under the joint name of Jñānadev–Tukārām. The British Administration continued the practice of the previous Peshwa rulers of making donations to the Āḷaṇḍī religious institution, and accordingly exercising a right to control its management, which similarly falls today under the control of the Pune district court. Today even the heads of Dnyanadev *pāḷkhī* feel proud that the rulers, whoever they might be, have always duly maintained their patronage and assistance.
36. For a head or *mālak* of *dinḍī* to obtain a number and recognition for his group is a matter of prestige and power. The practice seems to be spreading for a couple of years, with leaders coveting the privilege of recognition and authority of owning a *dinḍī* to buy an already existing one at high cost, or to join it as a sub-*dinḍī* under one single number. Cases of four or five sub-numbers being combined are common, and the *panch* committee is aware of it. It is up to the Vārkarīs to stop the 'horse of honour', publicly object with cymbals, or lodge a complaint with the meeting of heads of *pāḷkhīs*.
37. The veena is a stringed instrument with a pumpkin as resonance chamber.
38. *Tutārī* is a wind instrument, a sort of long horn, which in yesteryears was used to sound alerts, for instance, to be ready to salute and welcome the arrival of a prince, or join the war, etc.
39. Nārad is a legendary *bhakta*, acting as messenger of gods in the *purāṇas*.
40. A story exists about this. Vimmhal made a string of basil beads and a veena out of a pumpkin and put it around his neck. He applied sandalwood paste on his forehead and applied *bukkā* on his head. Then the bamboo became displeased. So to please the bamboo, he used it to make a *patākā*.
41. Amritnath Swāmi from Karad was running a business in eggs. He built a *dharmshala* in Āḷaṇḍī for the diffusion of Bhāgavat *dharma*, opening many branches in other places, such as the one in Dhamari, where he launched a *saptāha*, a week dedicated to the god Datta (chanting his name for seven days). Getting the news of his only son's death during such a week

while having his meal on a Monday after a full day's fasting, he took only one bite and rushed to his village. His daughter-in-law married another young man in spite of his firm opposition. He died soon after. Since then people have paid her no notice even when she visits the *dharmshala* that he founded, where a disciple, Shyam Bābā, carries on his work.

42. The *āratī*s to both Jñānadev and Tukārām are sung in the Tukārām *pālkhī*, but the *āratī* to Tukārām is prohibited in the Jñānadev *pālkhī*, despite complaints against this ostracism. One gets the strong impression that Jñānadev and Eknāth, both Brahmans, tend to be extolled as the leading references in the Bhakti movement as a whole, while Nāmdev, a tailor, is put aside, despite his highly significant historical importance; Tukārām the Śūdra can hardly be left aside considering his outstanding literary acumen and excellence; all *kirtankārs* cannot but profusely quote and draw upon his *abhangas*. In the daily slogans and acclamations, the pair Jñānadev–Tukārām is usual, while the attribute *māulī* is attached to Jñānadev and *jagatguru* (the guru of the world) to Tukārām when they are separately invoked.
43. Surprisingly, a number of caustic stories circulate among the Vārkarīs about the whimsicalities of *kirtankārs*. Vārkarīs enjoy gossiping about their weakness of character as regards women, their liking for and expectation of good food, the tricks that they use to exchange knowing looks and make signs to women whom they have spotted. For example, people told me, 'They ask everybody to sing and clap by holding hands over their heads, because when women clap in this way, their breasts move up and down; then you see the *kirtankār* staring at them and getting an eyeful.'
44. My upbringing in a particular family, caste and school had trained me how to properly conduct myself in everyday life as per the usual established social and cultural patterns defined, prescribed and understood as one's own culture, as regards relationships between a man and woman relationship, master (*guru*) and student (disciple), and people from one's own and other castes, for instance, with whom to eat or not to eat, with whom to talk or not, how to look at others, etc. Thus, initially I was very reluctant to join the dance.
45. Medieval chronicles composed as a part of the corpus of Hindu scriptures.
46. Whether Viṭṭhal carries a Śivliṅga at all on the head is a very problematic issue.
47. The bride is made to pronounce this sentence during the Hindu wedding ceremony with reference to her husband. This ritual and *saṁskara* (cultural value) leads women to imbibe as a virtue of their state of their spouse, and puts a wife in a state of total subjection to a husband. No wonder that women who are deserted, widowed, orphaned, deprived of satisfactory physical and affective intimacy or companionship with their husbands and so on easily surrender to a *guru* or similar figures of authority, for they

automatically look for and find such a gratifying relationship. This point definitely deserves serious research, considering the great number of such women in the *vārī*, the urge for affective gratification and personal intimacy that our study reveals, and even, as often brought to light by scholars, the erotic context that characterizes the Bhakti cult.

48. *Prasāda*: any sweetmeat given as a thanksgiving or parting gift after a religious function in a gesture of sharing god's blessing.
49. Let us remember and stress the conceptual definition of *sant* as the one who passed away alive into god as fulfilment of an urge to desert a world of suffering, illusion and vanity.
50. This point is explicitly articulated at the ideological level by the non-ritualistic, non-institutional and non-intellectual way of liberation through devotional faith only advocated by Jñānadev's *Haripāṭh* (Vaudeville 1969).
51. In the tradition of grindmill songs, the grindmill itself is figured as a substitute to the ṛṣi, a hermit from the mountain, whom harassed peasant women, leaving their (in-laws') house, run to meet for solace, opening their heart to him (Poitevin and Rairkar 1996: 121).
52. The holiness and exemplary virtue that characterises a *sant* are commonly projected in the form of a wandering holy man, a *sādhu* or a *sanyāsī*. These persons choose to give up all commitments to this world; they have no family, no profession, no home, no social status altogether, and they live on begging, with no attachment whatsoever in this life here below. In a similar way, *vārī*, *vārkarīs* are expected to forget their family and renounce worldly affairs.
53. It is difficult to evaluate the proportion of *Vārkarīs* who attend the *vārī* regularly, but definitely such is the case with a majority of them (60 to 70 per cent maybe).
54. It seems that this practice was discontinued in 1975, with the death of the man who used to send the string of beads (Dhere 1984: 273).
55. *Karmakā*: the section of the Vedic scriptures which speaks of rites, and by extension the rites and observances collectively obligatory on Brahmans.
56. Among the agencies of this first collective actor, a set of connected partisan collectives are most active and conspicuous: the Rastriya Swayamsewak Sangha, the ideologically leaning body that holds sway over and directs all other groups; three missionary outfits: the Vishva Hindu Parishad, which mainly gathers *sādhus*, *sanyāsīs*, *purohīts*, *pujārīs*, ascetics like *bairāgīs* and *jogīs*, etc., the religious dignitaries, Durga Vahini, the women's branch, and Bajran Dal, groups of zealots, the latter two displaying a particularly aggressive zeal; the Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad, the students' wing; and the Bharatiya Janata Paksha, the corresponding political party. They try to systematically infiltrate the *vārī* at all levels, through distributing free of charge or selling pamphlets and booklets, food and meals, etc., but mainly indirectly through approaching and persuading

leaders, organizers, institutions or associations. Their main strategy is ideological, namely, spread ideas through a propaganda resorting to all possible means of transmission and communication, the ultimate aim being explicitly an hegemonic domination.

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# 17

## THE FAMOUS INVINCIBLE DARKIES\*

DENIS-CONSTANT MARTIN

### New Year at the Cape

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Cape Town, early on in the evening of 31 December 1994, in the Bo-Kaap (also known as the Malay Quarter, at the foot of Signal Hill): people, very often whole families, start gathering in the streets and try to find a good spot to watch the choirs when they come. Numerous food and beverage stands are erected. Until the morning of 1 January, *nagtroepe*, as the *singkore* or Malay choirs are called on this occasion, march in the streets wearing their special track-suits, stop and sing in front of friends' houses or of social clubs, and are offered a *tafel* (a table, that is, food and drinks).

The same day, in the morning, Coon<sup>1</sup> troupes begin gathering at their *klopskamer* (club headquarters and rehearsal place). They are dressed in colourful uniforms and make their faces up in black and white or in glittering colours. They usually perform a few items there before boarding the buses that drive them to the stadia where competitions are to take place.

\* I wish to express my gratitude to Gerald L. Stone for comments and corrections he made on an earlier version of this text. However, I remain responsible for its content and its possible weaknesses. This paper was initially written in 1997.

On the afternoon of 1 January, carnival competitions begin at the stadia. They include about twenty items, for adult and 'juvenile' participants: different types of marches, various repertoires of choral and solo singing, drum major performances, band performances, as well as 'best dress' (for the nicest uniforms) and 'best board' (carved or painted emblems of the troupes carried on top of a pole). Competitions attract several thousand spectators. They are judged by 'adjudicators' and, eventually, trophies are handed to the winners in the different categories.

Apart from competitions at the stadia, an important moment of the festivals is *Tweede Nuwejaar* (the 'Second New Year') when troupes march in the streets of Cape Town. Starting from the former limits of District Six,<sup>2</sup> they follow a traditional itinerary through the town centre, then the Bo-Kaap, to Green Point. Again, in broad daylight, crowds gather on the sidewalks to 'watch the Coons'.

After their street performances of New Year's Eve, *singkore* hold their own competitions in various concert halls during the months of January and February. They perform four songs belonging to four traditional repertoires. In the concert halls choir members wear suits and fezzes: they are also judged for 'best dress'. Malay choirs sometimes assemble in a stadium when they march and present their floats.

Finally, in January, competitions of the Christmas choirs (Christian brass bands) also take place. They march, play in their own arrangement a hymn selected by the organizers, and display their uniforms (suit and hat) and banners. They are judged by experts seconded from the Church Brigade and the South African Defence Force.

In order to get ready for the New Year, troupe and choir members, captains, musical coaches and tailors devote long hours of hard work. Leaders of troupes, choirs and bands are busy all year round with preparations for competitions and marches. Active members usually start meeting and rehearsing in August or September; many others join them as the end of the year nears. Significant sums of money are involved, especially in the confection of costumes, but also in renting the venues where competitions take place. And, especially during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, nothing could happen without tedious negotiations with government authorities.<sup>3</sup>

## The Coon Debate

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Over several decades the Coon Carnival celebrated in Cape Town has generated heated controversies. An essential part of the New Year festivals<sup>4</sup> involving mostly members of the group which for a long time in South Africa's history has been classified and labelled as coloured, they mobilize thousands of people every year. Spurred on by a competitive spirit, characterized by the wearing of special costumes, inextricably tied to singing and dancing, the Coon Carnival can be seen as a manifestation sharing striking similarities with festivals in Europe, America or Asia. Like most passage and renewal festivals, it stages in a disguised and symbolic fashion the interplay of life and death, the resilience of communities in spite of the disappearance of their individual components. Generally speaking, these festivals provide an occasion for having fun in ways that break with social conventions; they allow for the utterance of humorous and sarcastic, sometimes obscene, speeches and songs, they generate particular body behaviours and, most of all, revive social links through consumption, sometimes excessive, of food and drinks and participation in troupes or bands of disguised revellers (Bakhtin 1984; d'Ayala and Boiteux 1988). However, in the South African context where a distorted notion of civilization based on Victorian ideas prevailed and served as an excuse for discriminating between human beings (Bickford-Smith 1995; Lewis 1987), such behaviours were not always accepted. They aroused opposed feelings, especially during the apartheid era, between 1948 and 1990.

For a large number of coloured people living in the Cape Peninsula, in particular for the workers and the underprivileged, the festivals were and still are the climax of the 'big days', a time for rejoicing and having fun. They provide the possibility of reaching '*die tariek*, to put [oneself] in another frame of mind, [to be] at another level',<sup>5</sup> then all the pains and toils of the year can be forgotten. For many members of the coloured educated elite after 1948, the Coon Carnival was a display of alienation, an 'undignified and degrading'<sup>6</sup> occasion where 'idiots [were] making monkeys of themselves'.<sup>7</sup> It thus reinforced white prejudices regarding the uncivilized nature of coloured people. Moreover, because the festivals were presented as 'a coloured thing',

an evidence of the existence of a separate coloured culture, they were seen by the elite as a 'pseudo cultural activity [which] gives people a false sense of identity' (*Argus*, 31 December 1980) and substantiated the racial theories underpinning apartheid.<sup>8</sup>

As a matter of fact, a large proportion of the white spectators who flocked in the streets or went to the stadia to 'watch the Coons' were looking for some entertainment, but it was not without a condescending bias towards the 'happy', 'jolly' performers; this attitude clearly shows in the benevolent articles on the Coons which were a regular feature of Cape Town's newspapers in December and January. Finally, politicians and government officials of the old South Africa did try to manipulate the Coons and the Malay choirs. They attempted to make them into emblems of the social situation they wanted the coloured people to occupy as, in the words of Jan Christiaan Smuts: 'an appendage to the Whites' (Lewis 1987: 210).<sup>9</sup>

The time has now come when it seems possible to revisit the history of Cape Town's New Year festivals, and in particular of the Coon Carnival. The fact that they have been going on for more than a century, in spite of many political interferences, in spite of all the disputes they have aroused, and in spite also of a continuous commercialization process, tells something of their importance and of the social dynamics that have fuelled them. It, therefore, appears that an investigation into the history and social meanings of the Coon Carnival may contribute to a better knowledge of social and political evolution in twentieth-century Cape Town, and to a finer understanding of how a great number of people, over a long period, reacted to oppression: both adapted to and resisted a system of power characterized by the use of brutal force to implement racial separation and discrimination.

Such an investigation should definitely shed some light on what Robert Shell has called the 'Creole culture of South Africa', and it may be in order to reproduce here excerpts from the last page of his study of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope:

Cape slavery has another legacy. Slavery brought different people together, not across the sights of a gun, as on the frontier, but in the setting of the home. Each slave was exposed to each owner and each settler to each slave on a very intimate footing. There was, in fact, a common reciprocal legacy, which might one day be considered more important than the unfair, but temporary and wholly worldly,

advantages that the slave owners enjoyed through slavery. This legacy was the as yet unexamined Creole culture of South Africa, with its new cuisine, its new architecture, its new music, its melodious forthright, and poetic language, Afrikaans, first expressed in the Arabic script of the slaves' religion and written literature. (Shell 1994: 415)

The New Year festivals in Cape Town have not been given the scholarly attention they deserve.<sup>10</sup> This essay should, therefore, be read as a somewhat tentative research note which is but a part of a larger programme.<sup>11</sup> It is based mainly on a compilation of newspaper articles and some other written sources, material that has been complemented by information collected through interviews.<sup>12</sup> The object of this study is to illustrate how organizational and aesthetic transformations that took place in the Coon Carnival during the twentieth century have been linked to political developments, and how both permanence and change in the Coons can be interpreted in relation to this political evolution.<sup>13</sup> I shall, therefore, begin with an overview of the history of the New Year carnival in order first to underline the main aesthetic changes that have affected it, and then to relate those changes to political events.

## A Brief History of the Coons

Carnival and music are inseparable, and without doubt the musical manifestations that were to become an integral part of the New Year festivals find their roots in the musical activity of the slaves.<sup>14</sup> Dance bands playing for European settlers in their mansions or for sailors in bars were often composed of slaves (Bouws 1966b: 138, 140–41). After emancipation, former slaves and their descendants continued to form dance bands that were very much in demand in nineteenth-century Cape Town among all classes. Before and after 1833 they mostly played European dance music of the times: waltzes, postillions, cotillions, polka, mazurka and, most of all it seems, quadrilles (Bouws 1946: 104–5, 1966b: 92; Pertinax 1961). But coloured musicians played other repertoires too. Weddings were always accompanied by singing, and picnics, which were a favourite form of social meeting and entertainment during the summer, were an occasion for much singing and dancing: *ghoemaliedjies* and the cushion dance, for instance, represented creolized forms in which Eastern elements of various origins were mixed with European elements.

Apart from music played in ballrooms or bars, outdoor music was very common and bands paraded in the streets, especially at the New Year when slaves were given a holiday; the tradition remained after emancipation (Pertinax 1961). An old, undated engraving kept at the South African Library shows such a group playing wind instruments (possibly *zurna*, a kind of oboe), violins and drums. It is titled 'Cape Slaves Celebrating their Emancipation by an Act of Parliament, 1833'. Historian Achmat Davids confirms that, on this particular day:

[...] the people took to the streets of Cape Town to sing. It was a time for the enjoyment of all. They were invited into the houses, they were entertained, invited to eat. It became a tradition. At a later point they shifted the day to New Year which was the original slave holiday. (*South*, 21 January 1994: 8)

The first mention of a street parade at New Year apparently goes back to 1823 (Van der Ross 1973: 598). By the end of the nineteenth century it had become a usual sight, and in 1886 one observer could write:

The frivolous coloured inhabitants of Cape Town, who take a holiday on the slightest pretext, indulged in their peculiar notions in regard thereto by going about in large bodies, dressed most fantastically, carrying 'guys',<sup>15</sup> and headed by blowers of wind and players of stringed instruments, who evoked from their horrible monsters the most discordant and blatant noises that ever deafened human ears. At night time these people added further infliction upon the suffering citizens of Cape Town in the shape of vocalization, singing selections from their weird music with variations taken from 'Rule Britannia' and the 'Old Hundredth'. They also carried Chinese lanterns and banners as they proceeded through the streets playing their discords, beating the drum, singing and shouting, and the strange glinting from the combined light from the street lamps and the Chinese lanterns fell upon their dark faces and they seemed like so many uncanny spirits broken loose from say [...] the adamant chains of the Nether World. ('New Years Holidays', *Cape Times*, 4 January 1896)

At this time singing societies were organized. They were tightly linked with sports clubs, and often the same people belonged to both groups.<sup>16</sup> It was those societies that 'buried the old year' in Church Square (Franck et al. 1967: 111; Stone 1971: 2), and it was probably a march by such a group in 1888 that was later described as the first carnival, although reports differ as to its importance.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless,

in the 1880s and 1890s bands and groups of singers, organized in societies distinguished by emblems and dress, marched the streets of the city and suburbs on New Year's Eve (*Argus*, 1 January 1908; *Cape Argus Weekly Edition*, 2 January 1889). Costume became an important element of these parades; societies prepared special outfits for the New Year, hung their colours across the street where their headquarters were located, and informally competed with each other in singing and marching, in elegance and originality, drawing their inspiration from many sources: the Darktown Fire Brigade wore firemen's uniforms and drew a water pump; others reproduced the stage costume of American minstrels who had been extremely popular since the middle of the nineteenth century (Franck et al. 1967: 110; Stone 1971: 3). At the turn of the century it seems that the minstrel or Coon troupes were already organized as later sources describe them.<sup>18</sup> There certainly was an element of emulation between the troupes, and they probably tried to outdo one another when singing in the streets. There is at least one mention of organized contests in the nineteenth century:

In 1874 a concertina competition for a gold wristwatch was held in the garden of the Good Hope Lodge, and there is mention of a competition in which a duet 'a la nigger minstrels' with the accompaniment by a banjo and 'bones' was performed. (Bouws 1966a)<sup>19</sup>

Then, eventually, on 1 January 1907:

Residents in the Peninsula were [...] afforded an opportunity of viewing a gathering on the Green Point Track of two or three hundred of those coloured mummers without whom New Year's Day in Cape Town is not complete. The occasion was a coloured carnival, and apparently the event must have been considered one of the main events of the holiday, for close on 7000 people found the road which led to the Track, packed the grand stands, and bordered the railings for a considerable distance. Naturally the coloured community was in force to cheer their compatriots engaged in the competitions, but there were also upwards of two thousand Europeans on the ground....

There were seven bands of mummers, decked out in the brightest colours, and accompanied by string bands. These formed the procession from the Parade. They created something of a stir on their passage through the streets, and were followed by a huge crowd of all colours, classes, and creeds....

The marching competition was the first item. The troupes paraded on the cinder path, every member of each troupe, with coat tails flying, prancing fantastically along the rattling of the bones, the tum-tum of the drums, the banging of tambourines, and the strumming of banjo and guitar .... Each corps had its marching song. Sung in that half chart, half mumble of the Cape mummer, and almost drowned in the strumming of the string instruments and the cheers of the spectators, it was difficult to ascertain what these were. They were typical coon ditties, and the guitar and banjo formed an effective accompaniment. (*Cape Times*, 3 January 1907: 7)

As is often the case with the history of the New Year festivals, the events leading to the first organized competitions at the Green Point Track are not very well known. The story, many times repeated, according to which the 'early coons sang and danced without thought of reward. In 1906, however, *The Cape Argus* offered a trophy and organised the first Green Point Track carnival' (Green 1951: 193), is clearly inaccurate: the date is 1907 (although preparations started in 1906) and there is no mention in the *Argus* that this newspaper had the initiative of the event (2 January 1907). Another story seems more plausible: the Green Point Track carnival was organized in order to raise money for the Green Point Cricket Club, which was then facing financial difficulties.<sup>20</sup> Whoever was responsible for it, the carnival was a success, not only in that it drew large crowds to the Track, but also because it set a frame within which the Coons inscribed their more prestigious activities, and provided a channel for the public expression of their competitive spirit.

Competitions at the Track were repeated in 1908 and 1909. Then they were discontinued until 1920 when, apparently at the last minute, Dr A. Abdurahman and Mr S. Reagon, the leaders of the African People's Organization, decided to organize a 'Grand Carnival on Green Point Track' to close the coloured people's effort 'on behalf of the Governor-General Fund'.<sup>21</sup> The event was such a success that it was repeated the following year, on 3 January, in aid of the Cape Town and Wynberg Board of Aid. Also in 1921, the Cape Town Cricket Club organized a rival carnival at Newlands and, in 1922, it managed to book the Green Point Track before Abdurahman and Reagon could do it.<sup>22</sup> From then on, Coon competitions took place annually in various venues, gathering increasing numbers of revellers and attracting

large audiences to such an extent that they became big commercial endeavours. Boards multiplied, sometimes (for instance, in 1960) as many as five rival boards were in operation; entrepreneurs, like Sonny Lloyd or J.W.G. Allen stepped in, who made a business of carnivals and caused troupes' captains to try and organize independently in 1961 and 1993. Eventually, a unified Carnival Development Committee was launched in 1994 and organized the competitions in the following years.

The important point here is that, whatever tribulations members of the troupes suffered, they continued to participate in the type of festive event that was inaugurated in 1907. They gave their time, their energy, their talent and their money,<sup>23</sup> to enter in competitions and proudly bring back some of the trophies to their *klopskamer* and show them around. They went on in spite of the difficult conditions most of them lived in, in spite of the war that made satin for the 'uniforms' almost unavailable, in spite of political constraints that grew more severe over the years, in spite of the scorn they were at times showered with by many intellectuals. These competitions must have meant something to them. One of the main questions raised by a study of the New Year festivals is, therefore: what did it mean to the people who participated in them?

### *The Emergence of the Cape Town Coon*

A brief review of influences that had a decisive impact on the New Year festivals and on the aesthetic features of these competitive celebrations may offer some clues in that respect. Singing and parading in the streets, visiting friends from house to house, entertaining them and accepting food and drinks from them became a Cape Town tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> A Cape Town tradition, that is, an already creolized tradition, therefore pre-existed what was to become the main model for Coon aesthetics: the black face minstrel show. It must be emphasized that it is from the encounter of Cape Town Creole musicians with American minstrels that the image of the modern Cape Coon evolved.<sup>25</sup>

The encounter was at first indirect: Coon songs reached the Cape through visitors, sailors or foreign comedians; some were possibly printed. The song 'Jim Crow', for instance, was famous even before the first troupe of American minstrels visited Cape Town (Bouws 1966b).

Local groups were formed who specialized in the performance of the minstrel repertoire, or at least interpreted a few 'Coon songs' whenever they sang.<sup>26</sup> Some of these groups were called 'serenaders', which seems to indicate that they directly came from the Cape tradition of outdoor singing, and one can get an idea of their style from a later description:

In the beautiful starry evenings your hear their part-songs, some of the fellows singing at their open windows; and now and again a string of them extending across the broad street and shouting ballads to the accompaniment of guitar and concertina [...] the latest success of the concert-room is reproduced immediately in the streets of the Malay Quarter. (Quoted in Bickford-Smith 1995: 188)

However, the qualifiers added to 'serenaders' already show a minstrel influence: according to Jan Bouws (1966b), the first group to appear was called the 'Celebrated Ethiopian Serenaders', others were named 'American' or 'Darkie Serenaders' and even, in Burgersdorp, 'Ethiopische Club' (Bouws 1966b). One such group performed when Prince Alfred visited the Cape in 1860; he was treated to a 'grand lingho and kalifa dance' and serenaders entertained him with 'choice Negro ballads' (*Cape Chronicle*, 7 September 1860).

When Christy's Minstrels arrived from the USA, they were already famous in South Africa, as they were in several other parts of the world. During a month or so (August–September 1862), their concerts caused a sensation and so did their return in November of the same year.<sup>27</sup> They gave a new impetus to the minstrel rage, which seems to have affected all classes of the Cape Town population. New local groups were organized and Coon acts became a must in most public entertainments and social functions. There were the Ethiopian Minstrels, alias the Fête Serenaders (*Cape Chronicle*, 15 March 1861), the Rover Minstrels (*Argus*, 9 and 13 January 1888) and the Amateur Coloured Troupe headed by Joe Lyal who, according to Veit Erlmann (1991: 31–32), presented weekly shows in 1869. After Christy's Minstrels, other troupes from overseas came to the Cape and contributed to maintaining the taste for black face minstrelsy and probably to increase the number of songs local groups could use. In 1887 H.A. Devere's Novelty Company arrived from Great Britain, but probably included several Americans (*Cape Argus*, 11 and 14 June 1887); in 1889 the Empire Minstrel had a

great success (*Cape Argus*, 10 December 1889); in 1890 the Mississippi Minstrels and Burlesque Company gave several performances (*Cape Argus*, 21 December 1889; 7 and 23 January 1890).

If songs composed during the American Civil War were soon incorporated in Cape Town singers' repertoire, it is quite unlikely that members of the crew on board the notorious Confederate raider, the *Alabama*, could have brought them to South Africa, since a majority of these sailors had been recruited at Liverpool. The popular song 'Daar Kom Die Alabama' ('Here Comes the Alabama'), with its peculiar structure, is definitely a Cape invention (Rosenthal 1938: 133–39; Winberg 1992). In the same legendary vein, it is very often mentioned that, on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887, a group of 'Jubilee Singers' performed at the Cape and had a special impact that was to be decisive on the shaping of Cape Town Coons' musical and dress aesthetics.<sup>28</sup> Minstrels' performances were given at the time of celebrations by local groups or bands from the British army and navy: Devere's Novelty Company, the Cape Town Amateur Band (*Argus*, 21 June 1887), the Christy Minstrel Troupe of HMS *Raleigh* and the 'Royal Scots Variety Company'.<sup>29</sup> This confirms that black face minstrelsy was a necessary part of any entertainment at the Cape in the 1880s, but there is no notice in Cape Town's newspapers of any visit by an American troupe. It is actually in 1890 that a touring group of African-Americans, Orpheus McAdoo's Virginia Jubilee Singers, stopped at the Cape. On the whole, between July 1890 and June 1898, they were to spend about five years in South Africa, and it is highly probable that some of their members, through contact with groups of coloured serenaders in Cape Town, contributed to the definitive inclusion of the Coon as the central character in New Year festivals.

Orpheus McAdoo's Virginia Jubilee Singers opened at the Vaudeville Theatre in Cape Town on 30 June 1890 and closed their South African tour again at the Cape on 25 January two years later.<sup>30</sup> They returned in June 1895 and the company remained in South Africa until 1898, though not without facing many problems and undergoing changes.<sup>31</sup> Sources mentioning concerts by Jubilee Singers in 1887 emphasize that members of the Singers established a close relationship with coloured musicians of Cape Town. Veit Erlmann writes that at least one singer, tenor Will P. Thompson, after directing for a while the Diamond Minstrels in Kimberley (and singing with the Colonial Concert

Company and the Philharmonic Society), rejoined McAdoo's Virginia Jubilee Singers to leave them again at the beginning of 1898, when he settled in Cape Town and performed with 'the Cape Town based, predominantly "coloured" Buffalo Glee and Concert Company with I. Bud-M'belle' (Erlmann 1991: 36, 50). Given the length of McAdoo's Singers' stay in South Africa and the time they spent in Cape Town, taking into account the association of Will Thompson until his death in 1900 with Capetonian entertainers, one may wonder if the American performers who made friends with the Dantu brothers<sup>32</sup> in the 1890s were not members of the Virginia Jubilee Singers, one of them possibly being Will Thompson. The fact that one of the companies organized by Thompson and Isaiah Bud-M'belle, the Diamond Minstrels, played for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee could bring some credit to this hypothesis, although the concert took place in Kimberley in 1893 (Coplan 1985: 41).

### *The Creolization of the Coon*

It is, therefore, over a period of almost half a century that Cape Town's New Year festivals progressively integrated minstrel elements. However, even at the turn of the century those elements were far from being exclusive of other forms of entertainment. 'Minstrel show' programmes often included variety acts and even renditions of classical European music favourites and singing of operatic arias. The Virginia Jubilee Singers repertoire was composed of religious hymns, Coon songs, glees and, at least on the evening of 17 October 1890, in King Williamstown, an air from Wagner's *Tannhauser* (Erlmann 1991: 35). When the first organized carnivals were held in stadia, they included Coon troupes, of course, but also groups of disguised revellers sporting costumes of a totally different inspiration: the Firemen of the Darktown Brigade were there, a good illustration of the 'mixture' prevailing then, since they wore firemen's uniforms but called themselves a 'Coon troupe'; the Rosebuds and the Princess Escort Masquerading Troupe had period costumes; the American Sporting Troupe played the 'Wild Indians', with masks, bows and arrows, but 'hospital nurses' also marched within their ranks.<sup>33</sup>

The first carnivals staged a large variety of troupes: there were the Coons and the Atjas (American Indians), but there were also the Glee Parties and the 'Privates'. The latter were 'more dignified', and

‘where the coons blacken their faces, the privates are more serious and they whiten their faces as much as possible, put on beauty spots and often wear wigs’ (*Cape Times*, 23 December 1937). They played ‘Cherry Pickers’, ‘Lords of London’, ‘Bull Fighters’, ‘Beau Brummels’, ‘Spanish Noblemen’, ‘Spanish Mountaineers Outlaws’, ‘Cattle Thieves’, ‘Mexican Cow Boys’, ‘Sea Pirates’, ‘Greek King’s Bodyguard’ and many more.<sup>34</sup> It is at the end of the 1930s that the Privates fade out and that the Coon becomes the dominant character. There was an attempt to artificially revive the Privates in 1953–54, but it does not seem to have aroused much interest, possibly because it could have been seen as a follow-up on the parade of historical troupes on the occasion of the Van Riebeeck Festival in 1952. After World War II, alongside the Coons, there remained only the Atjas and the ‘Bits and Pieces’ or the ‘Odds and Ends’ who consisted of small groups in rags or heterogeneous dress.

Among the Privates, were also African Warriors, Matabele Warriors, Kikuyu Warriors and Zulu Warriors, and there was one instance at least in 1909 when efforts were made to include African dancers in a carnival programme, the Kafir Dance. However, it ‘had to be abandoned on account of the opposition of the coloured missionaries’ (*Cape Times*, 1 January 1909: 8). In the beginning it also seems that Christmas choirs and Malay choirs were not seen as separate from the minstrel troupes as they are today. For example, the College Boys, a *singkoor*, sang at the Green Point Track in 1924 (*Argus*, 3 January 1924); competitions for brass bands were organized in 1907, 1908 and 1909; and, for many years, Christmas bands continued to accompany *nagtroepe* and *klopse* on their New Year’s Eve marches (Aschman 1948). In addition to the variety of troupe types, competitions and shows were also more diverse than at present, and one could see lantern processions, stilt walkers and dancers. The latter competed in the ‘buck and wing’, ‘cake walk’ (single or double), ‘clog dancing’, ‘step dancing’ categories and ‘Eastern dances’ featured in 1908. It was at the end of the 1930s, again that dance competitions were deleted from the carnival programme.

Not only did the style of dress change and dance competitions disappear, music and songs also transformed. The element of novelty was always important and the ‘hits’ of the day usually found their way to Cape Town’s stadia. But a double process was at work: not every popular song was adopted by the Coons and some of those that were retained remained in their repertoire long after their popularity

had waned elsewhere. Moreover, the songs were often reworked and included in pot-pourris that appeared like an original *bricolage* of material gleaned on the international pop music market. This means that, although new songs could be adopted and performed every year, they were given a particular form and inserted in a special local mode of expression which conferred on them a particular signification in the local Cape Town context. Musical instruments used to accompany marching troupes or to back singers also changed. In the beginning string bands were the rule and among the percussions the ‘bones’ were frequently mentioned. The bones seem to have progressively given way to tambourines; and the string bands that still share the stage with Malay choirs in competitions have been succeeded by brass bands. When interviewing Capetonians who have been involved for a long time in the Coons, at the question ‘What have been the most important musical changes in the history of the carnival?’, the answer was invariably the passage from string bands to brass bands, without any reference to the styles of music, nor any precise information as to when this passage occurred. However, it probably happened during the 1950s. Another evolution that took place in music played during carnivals is the introduction of Afrikaans songs. From the start, it was noted that ‘with regards to the songs, it was a pity that nearly all of these were of THE AMERICAN COON variety; and that hardly a single Afrikander song was heard throughout the afternoon or evening’ (*Cape Times*, 3 January 1908: 3). After World War II competitions were introduced for Afrikaans *liedjies* (Afrikaans songs) and Afrikaans *moppies* (Afrikaans comic songs).

In brief, the main lines of change that affected Cape Town’s New Year festivals were that during the second half of the nineteenth century, minstrel elements became integrated in serenaders’ and *klopse*’s performances, and affected both their way of presenting themselves (dress and make-up) and their musical productions (style of playing, instruments—banjo and bones in particular—repertoire). At the beginning of the twentieth century minstrelsy had become an integral part of the aesthetics of the New Year festivals; it did feature in the competitions that were organized in stadia, but did not exclude other forms of masquerading. In the 1920s and 1930s carnivals offered their audiences a wide variety of entertainment and music. It is between the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1950s that carnivals took

the form that they have, more or less, kept until today. The Coon became the dominant character; items in competition were fixed in a way that was not going to change much later.<sup>35</sup> Dances disappeared. And as mentioned, Afrikaans *liedjies* and *moppies* were added. Later brass bands took over string bands. In other words, over about a century, between mid-nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century, there occurred a steady process of 'Coonification' of the New Year carnival.

I would like to suggest that it is this global and protracted process that has to be taken into consideration when one tries to understand the social meaning of Cape Town's New Year festivals. Therefore, it may be useful to present some hypotheses relative to the local understanding and signification of Coon troupes before assessing briefly the amount of political interference that the carnival had to suffer from successive South African governments and Cape Town city councils.

### A Way to Keep in Touch with a Wider World of Modernity

The origins of the New Year festivals pre-date the emancipation of slaves. Then Christmas, the summer season, New Year celebrations and holidays for the slaves coincided and were an occasion for building and strengthening social links within a community of persons coming from various cultural backgrounds and grouped together by the sharing of the same condition. There is nothing specifically South African in the 'invention' of festivals and the creation of informal organizations to construct a community liable to make sense for its members in a situation where their inclusion into this particular group has been imposed by force from the outside. The same type of phenomenon was part and parcel of strategies of 'adaptive survival' (Bastide 1967) in most slave societies, especially in the West Indies and in North America (Martin 1991). After the slaves were set free, there began a fusion between the celebration of the emancipation anniversary and the New Year. New Year festivals, picnics, weddings were times for singing and dancing, for visiting friends and partaking in food and drinks, traditions which are common to civilizations of Asia, Africa and Europe and may have provided one of the 'overlapping areas' from which Creole manifestations can develop to form an original culture (Martin 1991). It appears to have been the case in

Cape Town also, where social links within the community constituted by former slaves and former political exiles were consolidated through such social practices. In the middle of the nineteenth century, elements entering in the 'Creole' blend were, as far as one knew, mostly from European and of Eastern origin. Religious Muslim songs and music played to accompany *ratiep* (or *khalifa*)<sup>36</sup> had roots in India and the East Indies (Desai 1983). Lay musical repertoires seem to have been in part European, derived from Dutch songs, English glees or popular songs, but their rendition certainly encompassed Eastern techniques, such as the *karienkél* (ornamentation of melodies which is still one of the main traits of Malay choirs' interpretations of *nederlandse liedjies* [ibid.]). Original Creole songs such as the *ghoemaliedjies* had already been created (Winberg 1992). Dances using body languages from the East took place at picnics or on the streets.<sup>37</sup> Some of the instruments played were European, but it should be remembered that violins, guitars and mandolins had already been adopted by musicians in Asia, and that they may have reached South Africa both from Europe and Asia, accompanied by playing techniques peculiar to one region or the other. As a matter of fact, Asian adaptations of European music and instruments (such as the raking lute) most probably formed part of the Eastern elements that entered into Cape Town's Creole inventions. The emblematic *ghoema* drum is a good example. Although it may be related to drums from Java, the Sunda Islands or Malaysia (Desai 1983: 32–35; Kirby 1939), it is made from a barrel and is similar to drums found in Creole societies where liquor was produced, like the West Indies. Also, its very name sounds amazingly close to the *pan-bantu* root *ngoma*, which connotes drum, drumming, dancing and music in general. If the *ghoema* has become a symbol of Cape Town's Creole culture, it may be precisely because Asia, Africa and Europe meet under its skin.

Consequently, it is at a time when a Creole culture, characterized both by social relations and by cultural productions, had already been formed, two centuries after the arrival of the first settlers and the first slaves and their meeting with aboriginal people, that minstrel influences became felt. It is, therefore, this Creole culture that provided the substratum on which minstrelsy was grafted. The invention of a Creole culture at the Cape (including the creation of the Afrikaans language) took place among people (whether they were *khoekoe*, slaves brought mostly from Asia, or political exiles sent to Southern Africa

by the Dutch) who were dominated by European settlers, and then among their descendants whose social situation was always one of subordination and who, from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1980s, were progressively deprived of whatever rights they may have enjoyed at the time of emancipation. This culture was a means to build social links within this group and to strengthen its cohesion. It was a way to give meaning to these social links by, on the one hand, signifying the inventive capacities of its members and therefore their humanity, and, on the other, by providing an original channel for expressing their situation as people whose experience was one of oppression in a context of intense cultural exchanges, whatever the dominant ideologies of inequality and separation may have been at the time.

Minstrel elements were added to certain manifestations of this Creole culture. After almost one century they became dominant in one type of manifestation, the *klopse* carnival, although they certainly also influenced *singkore* (as can be seen in their performance of the *moppies*). Consequently, one may assume that the social meaning of the main public event where this Creole culture was displayed, the New Year festival, was not radically altered by the inclusion of elements of minstrelsy, but, on the contrary, that minstrelsy contributed to refining its meaning.<sup>38</sup> The question to be asked is: what signification did the selective integration of Coon minstrelsy, as it was locally re-interpreted and re-enacted to become dominant in post-World War II carnivals, add to social links and Creole practices of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Cape Town?

The answer is complex indeed. First, the American origins of black face minstrelsy must be remembered. The Coon was an offensive caricature of African-American southern rural slaves brought to the stage by white comedians for the enjoyment of white patrons. Both the word and the type of show it served to name were racist and based on the belief in the inferiority of African-Americans, who were called 'niggers', 'Negroes', 'darkies' and also 'colored people'. The identification of South African coloureds with the Coon seems to confirm an attitude of self-depreciation that was rampant in the community, especially in the underprivileged classes (O'Toole 1973; Stone 1971: 43, 1991).

However, one should also consider other aspects of minstrelsy when seen from Cape Town, and how they evolved. Minstrelsy came from overseas; it was one of the main types of entertainment at the end of

the nineteenth century and was, therefore, fashionable and provided an opening to the world beyond South Africa. That it was fashionable gave it a particular aura when it first reached Cape Town. For people who were already considered musicians par excellence, and able at playing all sorts of popular dances, becoming minstrels amounted to keeping up with their times. When minstrel shows were no longer internationally in favour, every new style appearing on the pop music market was eventually integrated in what had become Cape Town's own minstrelsy: American standard songs of the 1930s as popularized by jazz singers, rock, soul music, Latin music, and today rap, disco and techno. The aptitude to assimilate new styles, to re-interpret certain songs and to fit them in the minstrel format is definitely one of the most important features of the Coon carnival.<sup>39</sup> In this process, films were important purveyors of new tunes. The bioscope (cinema) was a centre of District Six's social life (Jeppie 1990; Nasson 1989). Coon captains used to go to the Star or the Avalon to see if there was anything they could use for the next carnival. Of David Petersen, the leader of the famous Spes Bona Coons, it was reported:

So keen is he to do the best for his troupe, that throughout the year he goes either to the Star or Avalon cinema in Hanover Street every Friday and Saturday to pick up catchy tunes for carnival time or ideas for brightening up costumes or the dance and solo numbers his club will present at New Year. (Aschman 1951)

Characters and costumes were reproduced from popular films of cowboys, Indians and outlaws of every description. The Coon type itself was given a new impetus by the fact that the first talking film featured a black face minstrel hero: when heard for the first time in Cape Town in 1929, Al Jolson's initial phrase 'Hello Mam' in Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927) ensured the victory of the 'talkie' and gave the Capetonian Coon a new flavour of modernity. Identifying with the American stage minstrel, then with the cinema 'jazz singer', framing all new fashions in popular music within the carnival was definitely a way to signify one's participation in modernity.

## The Coon as a Figure of Ambivalence

The modernity of the Coons and of popular music was not, however, just another form of modernity. Minstrelsy included aspects of

African–American culture. Initially, it made a mockery of it, but the success of minstrel shows persuaded groups of African–American artists to make their faces up and don worn tailcoats. It has already been mentioned that the entertainers who probably had the strongest impact on Cape Town coloured musicians belonged to such a troupe which, in addition to minstrel songs, also introduced South African audiences to spiritual and other types of music, and did not hesitate to sing parts of operas. In South Africa some of the first groups of local minstrels had African, European and coloured members (Coplan 1985: 41). Later, jazz and swing became popular in Cape Town, as well as other styles originating either directly or indirectly in the African–American communities of the United States: rhythm and blues, rock, soul music, disco, rap, funk, techno; that is, the '*mestiza*' music which came to dominate the world of entertainment after radio, records and then television became the main medium of communication. There appear to be at least two sides to the Cape Town Coon's passion for fashionable pop music. It demonstrates the will and capacity to participate in modernity at every stage of its development. It shows adherence to an alternative form of modernity, a modernity that did not conform to ruling South African canons: in particular because it was a non-white modernity, a *mestiza* modernity.

The aesthetics of the Coon Carnival are one of heterogeneity; they associate step dances and instruments that come from the nineteenth century with the latest productions in music or in film; they combine elements that have clearly their roots in Cape Town's Creole culture and traits that are borrowed whenever possible from across the oceans. They are symbolized by the 'copycats' who have always been dear to Cape Town's carnival audiences: Cape Town's Charlie Chaplin; Cape Town's Al Jolson; Cape Town's Paul Robeson; the coloured Harry Lauder; the coloured Bobby Breen;<sup>40</sup> the coloured Caruso, and so on. It is the aesthetics of heterogeneity that may help one understand some of the social signification involved in Cape Town's New Year festival and the place Coons occupy at the centre of it. Heterogeneity is a reflection of the formation process of a Creole culture and is, therefore, emblematic of those who have carried and developed it for several centuries, of those who, in the words of librarian and trustee of the District Six Museum Foundation, Vincent Kolbe, 'have come from the coloured experience'. For those who were confronted with the closure of South Africa during the apartheid years, the accumulation of discriminatory

laws that clearly signified that the rulers considered coloured people as a 'negative group [...] the left-overs',<sup>41</sup> the eclecticism underpinning an aesthetics of heterogeneity was one way of keeping in touch with a world of ever-increasing modernity and ever more intense cultural mixing. The progressive 'Coonification' of the carnival eliminated most elements that carried references to the European past, or to cultures that were not perceived as mixed. Attempts at reviving them, as in 1952, 1953 and 1954, failed due to lack of popular support. The Atjas remained because they had become symbols of street culture and were a special enjoyment for children who at the same time loved and feared them,<sup>42</sup> but they were, like all other troupes, dealt a severe blow by the Group Areas Act and the destruction of District Six. Finally, the predilection for opera was incorporated in minstrelsy. Solo singers, when not 'crooning' in the manner of American stars, sung their item with an operatic voice. In 1994 a singer in Coon uniform was acclaimed after singing 'Nessun Dorma' from Giacomo Puccini's 'Turandot', and one of the highlights of the 1995 carnival was when James Bhemgee, Dennis Weindell and Fuad Sawyer played the 'Three Tenors' for the Penny Pinchers All Stars.

In the end, the Coon appears as the figure of ambivalence (Stone 1991: 98). He embodies at the same time elements that express self-depreciation affecting important numbers of coloured people in Cape Town, and elements which symbolically contradict the inferiority feeling by building bridges with modernities invented in Creole societies and by identifying with their musical ambassadors.<sup>43</sup> If James O'Toole (O'Toole 1973: 27) is right when he writes: 'Coloureds are taught two mythical lessons: (a) white is positive and black is negative; and (b) racial purity is superior to mixing', then Coon troupes and their performances look very much like a discreet rejection of these myths. This is probably why the carnival has survived the commercialization process, restrictions of all sorts to the freedom of marching in the city, and political manoeuvres aiming at making it into a demonstration of what O'Toole calls the 'mythical lessons' taught to coloureds.

## Apartheid and the Coon

As far as can be known from written reports, the three first carnivals, in 1907, 1908 and 1909, went smoothly. It is most likely though that to

*klopse* members and their friends the big affair then was not so much competitions in stadia as marching and singing in the streets, visiting friends and sharing *tafels*. This attitude may have prevailed as long as District Six was inhabited; the more so since many people were too poor to afford buying an entry ticket to the stadia. When public competitions resumed in 1920, things had already begun to change. The organizers of the Green Point Track carnival were Abdurahman and Reagon, leaders of the African Political Organization (APO) that was to be, for several decades, the main coloured political body struggling, even if without much success, against the adoption and implementation of segregationist laws affecting coloured people. Benefits from the gate takings at the Track were presented to charitable organizations; it became a matter of principle that whenever any profit was made from carnivals, donations should be given to charities. The involvement of APO's leaders in the Coons lasted until 1940 when A.E. Abdurahman<sup>44</sup> was chairman of the Western Province Jubilee Carnival Board.

In 1921 a rival carnival was held under the auspices of the Cape Town Cricket Club at the Western Province Rugby Ground, Newlands. It was advertised as a 'Monster Minstrel Carnival' and the ad indicated that there was a 'special reserved area' where seats cost three times the price of the regular admission (*Argus*, 31 December 1920; *Cape Times*, 1 January 1921). This marked the beginnings of segregation within carnival venues. In 1923 carnivals at the Pier (*Argus*, 29 December 1922) and at the Green Point Track had 'reserved seats for Europeans', and from then on segregation steadily crept up on into the carnival. In the 1950s touring Coon troupes performing in Port Elizabeth, East London, Kimberley and Bloemfontein had to put on shows for Europeans only (*Cape Times*, 5 February 1951, 15 November 1956). In Cape Town, arenas where the Coons used to compete were closed to them because they were located in 'white areas': Rosebank Stadium in 1953 and the Green Point Track in 1967. Certain venues, the Athlone Stadium in particular from 1971 onwards, were reserved for 'non-white' spectators. In places where multi-racial audiences were still allowed, organizers had not only to isolate whites from 'non-whites' but also provide 'separate amenities'.

The authorities imposed segregation on carnival competitions held in stadia. They also tried to modify their organization and transform their content. A leitmotif of white opinion on the carnival was that it was

poorly organized and propositions were made to improve it, suggesting that it be taken over by other bodies or by the City Council. I.D. du Plessis was extremely consistent in the opinion that:

The carnival spirit, which was strongly evident in the abandon, the good spirits and joyous dancing of the competitors, was marred by faulty organisation; and yet one realised that here was a material for a carnival which, if properly organised, would be one of Cape Town biggest attractions during the festive season.<sup>45</sup>

During the war, between 1941 and 1945, carnivals were organized by an official from the City Council, the municipal manager of beach entertainments. For a long time (as press reports go, from 1925 to 1973) prizes were handed out by or in the presence of officials: city councillors, mayors and mayoresses, MPs, the commissioner for coloured affairs (du Plessis in 1960, F. L. Gaum in 1973), foreign diplomats (including the French consul, Jean Ortoli in 1968), a chairman of the executive of the Coloured Representative Council (Tom Swartz in 1970). The presence of these personages cannot be simply interpreted as an endorsement of the Coons as representatives of Cape Town's original culture; it was also, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, an indication that the Coon carnival was seen from officialdom in the perspective of the type of coloured identity that suited apartheid theory and practice. This was even more evident when the participation of Coon troupes and Malay choirs in the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival was required, and it raised a heated debate among cultural activists.<sup>46</sup>

From this point of view, the carnival had to abide with ideas of Afrikaner superiority and with segregation regulations; it had to demonstrate that coloured people were different, but that their only source of culture was white. Two major stakes were involved in the carnivals: language and Cape Town's identity. Although coloured people living in the Cape Peninsula have Afrikaans for their mother tongue (Stone 1991), the language of the Coons was mostly English: songs were sung in English,<sup>47</sup> the troupes' names were in English. Since the beginning of organized competitions white observers complained about the lack of Afrikaans songs (or songs in *kleurling taal*) in the carnival (*Cape Times*, 3 January 1908; *Cape Herald*, 7 January 1967), and pressures were exerted on the Coons to sing Afrikaans songs in competitions (Aschman 1949). In 1949, in spite of the reluctance

of troupe captains, two new items were introduced:<sup>48</sup> the Afrikaans combined chorus and the Afrikaans *moppie*. They are still part of the carnival programmes today.

The battle for the street was tougher. New Year festivals were born in the street. Parades in various Cape Town districts and in the city were an integral part of the celebrations. In the nineteenth century it was right in the centre of town that the old year was buried. And, as soon as competitions were organized at Green Point, Coon troupes spectacularly marched to the Track from District Six and southern suburbs, crossing the city on the way. Many testimonies, including those recorded in 1994, link the marches in the heart of Cape Town with a feeling of possession. 'We—meaning coloured people—are Cape Town' is a common statement, often followed by 'without us, Cape Town would have had no history and no culture'. In the conditions of hardening segregation, the strict apartheid that prevailed from the beginning of the century to the 1980s, parading in the streets of the town centre was, therefore, construed as an affirmation of the right of coloured people over Cape Town, over all of it; as a claim that the Mother City in fact belonged to them. Thus, the restriction and suppression of the right to march in Cape Town was logically understood as an insult added to the injury of eviction and dispossession under the Group Areas Act. The City Traffic Department granted permits to each troupe to parade through the streets in November, December and January, but the number of Coons on the road was limited to 200 per troupe (*Cape Times*, 8 January 1951). Traffic was never stopped to make the marches easier; on the contrary, dislocation of automobile traffic was the most frequent excuse used to limit the right of marching, as happened in 1955 and 1956. Then, when Green Point was declared a 'white area' and the use of the Track was forbidden for carnivals, parades in central Cape Town became even more difficult, the more so since people started being expelled from District Six and other neighbourhoods to be relocated in the Cape Flats, in places from where it was no longer possible to walk to the centre. In these new conditions, transport had to be organized and, of course, renting buses added to the costs of running a troupe to such an extent that it acted as another strong deterrent to parading in the centre. Finally, in 1977 all Coon marches were forbidden in any part of Cape Town under the Riotous Assembly Act. Parades in the City centre were allowed again in 1989 and attracted huge crowds

after permission had been given to use the new Green Point Stadium for a Coon Carnival (*Cape Times*, 4 January 1989).

Through the tribulations of the Coons, one may read yet another history of how segregation and apartheid entered every sphere of life,<sup>49</sup> of how the government attempted to limit the expression of a form of popular culture while trying to use it for their own ends. The mere fact that carnivals went on from the 1920s to the 1990s, bears witness to the endurance and resilience of the Coons and of the people who supported them. Sometimes, they provided occasions for outbursts of anger, when the social and political context spurred disappointment and discontent. The 1886 riots that developed following the New Year festival can be seen as a forerunner of what was to happen sporadically later.<sup>50</sup> Carnivals in Cape Town must have been, as elsewhere, a privileged occasion for singing satirical songs and ridiculing those in power. Such words and behaviour, however, were not likely to be recorded in the local press. Political songs were created in the 1880s (Bickford-Smith 1995: 188; Winberg 1992: 93). Shamil Jeppie (1990: 61) reports that in 1952 a popular song announced ‘Van Riebeck’s thing is finished’; he also quotes Alex La Guma who saw in 1957 ‘a trouper, “with a picture of Herr Strijdom sewed to the seat of his pants”’ (ibid.). Such expressions of overt opposition, even though isolated, may have been much more frequent. Disturbances did feature in the newspapers, and it is striking that the sequence of troubles linked to carnivals more or less corresponds with a sequence of important political events. In 1948, or soon after, violence erupted during the carnival: the mayoress had to present the prizes from behind a steel mesh screen (Pinnock 1984: 162).<sup>51</sup> In 1964 there was a brawl involving rival troupes over the awarding of the trophies. The police intervened, but were then attacked by spectators and showered with bottles. In the streets, cars were attacked by Coons and their drivers molested (*Cape Times*, 6 and 8 January 1964). In 1975 policemen were attacked by revellers coming out of the Athlone carnival (*Cape Times*, 9 January 1975), and when they showed up again at Athlone stadium in 1977, they were welcomed by hostile cries.<sup>52</sup> During the late 1970s and early 1980s incidents multiplied when Coons smeared white passers-by in the streets, sat in the ‘white section’ of trains or threw various objects at the police (*Argus*, 27 January 1977, 2 January 1979, 27 December 1982).

## New Year Festivals as Contested Terrain

That there were occurrences of trouble, violence and even open confrontation does not mean that Coon Carnivals can be interpreted as 'weapons of the weak', as media of resistance, even in a subdued or symbolic form. However, they were not either simply degrading manifestations of alienation in the course of which people were 'celebrating their enslavement for the amusement of the Herrenvolk'.<sup>53</sup> If the Coon is, as has been suggested, a figure of ambivalence, the carnivals were a two-sided affair where adaptation and resistance to the system were inextricably intertwined.

Coon troupes and carnival boards evidently conformed to segregation laws, apartheid and, especially, to the Group Areas Act. They complied with regulations that were imposed upon them, not without much grumbling and foot-dragging, but not sometimes without complacency. This is exemplified, for instance, in the declarations of one carnival organizer, J.W.G. Allen, when anti-apartheid groups advocated a boycott of the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival. He insisted on displaying the 'festival spirit' as 'interpreted by the coloured people' (*Cape Times*, 27 February 1952). This generated a heated debate, resulting in the controversies opposing political organizations.<sup>54</sup> The same type of controversy developed on other occasions, notably in 1977, after the Soweto upheaval, and in 1985, when the Western Cape was boiling with student unrest and mass action. Appeals were made to not celebrate the New Year festivals, but the carnivals eventually took place. For the organizers, the financial stakes may have been too high to adhere to the boycott; some of them probably did not want to incur the wrath of the authorities. On the part of the rank and file revellers, the carnival clearly played the role of a safety valve: it was the time when one could let go and forget about fifty-two weeks of humiliation; they could not see any reason why they should have renounced the one occasion they had during the year to really enjoy themselves and reach '*die tariek*' to forget about it all.

At the same time though, their stubbornness in celebrating the New Year no matter what happened had another dimension. A feeling of political powerlessness prevailed among coloured people, especially in the working class (O'Toole 1973: 115). But it was counterbalanced by a

feeling of belonging, which did not correspond to the type of 'coloured identity' the government wanted to engineer, and was materialized, expressed and perceived in the New Year festivals. A theme that runs like a red thread in non-directive interviews conducted in 1994 is articulated as the imperative necessary to 'preserve the culture'. This implied an ensemble of values and practices that tie together the members of a community. For at least two sets of reasons, the New Year festivals form an important, albeit definitely not exclusive, part of this ensemble. First, because they were, from the beginning during slavery, an occasion for establishing social links and giving, then consolidating, social cohesion to a collectivity of people brought together, not of their own free will but by forced deportation and enclosure within the bounds of a common condition. When one looks at the organization and functioning of today's Coon troupes and Malay choirs, it becomes quite evident that they still play the same role.<sup>55</sup>

Second, because from a comparative perspective Cape Town New Year festivals appear to be renewal festivals, a transposition in South Africa's climatic and social conditions of the festivals celebrated in many parts of the world, as a cyclical re-affirmation of the continuity of life in the form of a collective rite of passage in which change is placed under the sign of recurrence. Anthropologist Marc Augé (1988: 8) says: 'The momentary coincidence of the singularity of many specific itineraries with the global character of one collective history, this is what passage festivals celebrate.'

Cape Town New Year festivals display features which are common to renewal and passage festivals all over the world: the use of masks (that is, an interrelated ensemble of facial decorations or make-up, costume and other accessories), the importance of music and dance, the sharing of food and drinks, the organization in identifiable groups, the competitive spirit, the freedom to act in unusual and normally objectionable ways and even some behaviours such as smearing oneself and other people with dark and sticky things. These festivals provide occasions when one can be, at the same time, oneself and another; when one who cannot normally escape one's condition can *choose* to be the other that one wants to be. Cape Town New Year festivals indeed provide such an occasion, and the final collective choice was the Coon, with his companion the 'American Indian', complex figures able to personify ambivalence for people living in a 'world of dilemma'

(O'Toole 1973: 28) where they were hardly free to choose what to do with their own life. These festivals, coming back every year at a fixed time historically associated with freedom, also made evident the permanence of the community of those who celebrated them.

From 1823 onwards, and probably before, until the 1990s, New Year festivals have taken place in Cape Town. Individuals have disappeared, aesthetic characteristics have changed, organizations have evolved; in the twentieth century many Coon troupes, Malay choirs and Christmas choirs have disappeared, others have been created, but every year on 1 January and *Tweede Nuwejaar* people marched, as much as they were allowed to, and sung in the streets, entertained friends and visitors, imagined extraordinary costumes and partook of *tafels*. The meaning of recurrence is clearly explained in interviews. At the initial prompt used in non-directive interviews, 'What do the Coons mean to you?', a great number of interviewees reacted by saying something like: 'My father was in the Coons, I am in the Coons, and my children will be in the Coons. The Coons will never die.'<sup>56</sup> The Coons and the New Year festivals, therefore, appear as a proclamation of an indestructible capacity of survival. The evidence, dancing in the streets, that an oppressed community of people who felt like a minority of 'inbetweeners',<sup>57</sup> could continue to exist in spite of all the tribulations they had to endure.

One troupe at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s was called the Famous Invincible Darkies. That was quite an eloquent manner of associating several traits that figure prominently in the carnival. *Darkies*: the interiorization of the stigma with a pinch of self-mockery (O'Toole 1973: 111–12) that may help to diffuse it; and, at the same time, the identification with a world of modernity and a *mestiza* culture. *Famous*: the affirmation of the creativity of members of the community, thence of their humanity; a creativity that translates in the emergence of talents during carnivals and in their ultimate recognition by audiences beyond the limits of South Africa.<sup>58</sup> *Invincible* (as a matter of fact an extremely rare occurrence in troupes' names): the capacity to endure and survive.

Assessing the social impact of carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, Kim Johnson (1984: 134) writes: 'Carnival has meant different things to different people.' The same obviously goes for Cape Town's New Year festivals. They provided an arena where contradictory forces interwove

and fought. They constituted a 'contested terrain' (Jules-Rosette and Martin 1997) where one of the highest stakes was the definition of an identity. In the Cape region, under duress from the particular South African situation, a set of people born as a group was confronted with recurrent attempts by the ruling classes to impose upon them boundaries and negative stereotypes in order to deny them their history and culture, their capacity to make the same and their share in the creation of a Creole culture. They invented an original festival, though related to general types of festivals found all over the world, where they could symbolically express their main concerns: building a community and a culture and preserving them. Those festivals, therefore, enacted one conception of a communal identity (just as language did [Stone 1991]), encompassing all sorts of ambivalence. Political authorities tried to exploit the festivals in order to give credence to their own beliefs in a hierarchy of human beings and in their necessary separation. The ambivalence of the Coon gave him a plasticity that allowed him to accommodate both discourses on coloured identity (Martin 1995a, 1995c): the racist one, implying inferiority and dependence on what was unduly presented as a 'white superior culture'; and the communal one, based on a feeling of belonging but implicitly defined by an openness towards the world (thence the possibility to add, fuse or change identities), systematic practices of blending cultural elements from various cultures, and the will to participate in every stage of modernity.

The Coon was the locus of a brutal but disguised confrontation; he could not be a fighter, but he survived, and with him survives, in the new South Africa, a silent discourse on one communal identity.

## Notes

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1. When dealing with the Coon Carnival and Cape Town's New Year festivals as a whole, one is confronted with words loaded with history. The word Coon is commonly used in English, without any negative connotation, by most participants to mean both the member of a carnival troupe, the central character of the carnival, and sometimes even a troupe (it is frequent to hear a captain say 'my Coon', meaning his troupe). Coon is derived from racoon, and was used in nineteenth-century USA as a racist designation for African-Americans (the stereotype combining their alleged taste for racoon meat

and their pretended resemblance with the animal). Because of its original meaning and how it translated in South African society, many have rejected the use of 'Coon', either condemning altogether the word and the carnival, or suggesting that the word be replaced by 'minstrel'. In Afrikaans, the Coons are referred to as '*klopse*' (from the English 'clubs', most probably because, at the end of the nineteenth century a number of coon troupes were born from sporting and social clubs), and it has sometimes been suggested that '*klopse*' be used instead of 'Coons'. However, in this chapter I have found it more convenient to stick to participants' usage for the sake of accuracy and simplicity, rather than invent from the outside an artificial 'political correctness'.

2. District Six was a predominantly coloured neighbourhood located close to the city centre. Although it became overpopulated and somewhat dilapidated, it was home to a very active social and cultural life and the cradle of the New Year festivals. It was declared a 'white zone' under the Group Areas Act, and its inhabitants were expelled and resettled in other neighbourhoods, mostly in the Cape Flats, sometimes as far as 30 km from the town centre (see Jeppie 1990; Jeppie and Soudien 1990).
3. The abrogation of all racist and apartheid laws has obviously transformed the relationship between festival organizers and public authorities, especially after the unification of the different carnival boards in a Carnival Development Committee in 1994 and the election of a new Cape Town City Council. However, the committee still has to deal with the council in matters regarding the organization of the carnival.
4. The New Year festivals result from the coincident activities of Coons, Malay choirs and Christmas choirs, which are closely associated in the minds of most participants and spectators. However, the scope of this essay does not extend to envisioning the New Year festivals in their totality; it will concentrate on the Coons and only cursory references will be made to Malay choirs and Christmas choirs.
5. Interview, January 1994.
6. Dr H. Kotwal, chairman of the Cape Muslim Assembly, *Argus*, 29 December 1973.
7. Letters to the editor, *Cape Herald*, 11 January 1975.
8. This point of view was vehemently articulated in the *Torch*, a Cape Town weekly supporting the Non-European Unity Movement and its programme of non-collaboration with white institutions. A comment on the 1948 carnival read: 'The annual throes of the death of a people's spirit in the form of this volcano of primitive ritual-dance are a welcome sight to slave-drivers' ('X-Ray of the News by Dr. Pangloss', *Torch*, 5 January 1948: 2).
9. Dr I.D. du Plessis, an academic 'expert' on 'Malay culture' turned commissioner for coloured affairs, played a prominent role in this respect. On the one hand, he stressed that the carnival represented an asset for Cape Town (*Cape Times*, 6 January 1936); he was instrumental in the

foundation of the Cape Malay Choir Board. On the other, he explained that his work at the head of the Department of Coloured Affairs 'although done on a basis of separation.... did not push the coloured man away but clasped him, as a Westerner, even more strongly, to the West' ('Coloured People Belong to the West', *Cape Times*, 26 August 1960). On I.D. du Plessis, see Jeppie (1987).

10. Compared to the vast literature devoted to festivals around the world, in particular of the carnivalesque type, texts dealing with, or at least taking into account, Cape Town's Coon Carnival are amazingly few. It goes without saying that my debt to these pioneering works is enormous, and I wish to acknowledge it here: Howard (1994), Jeppie (1990), Jeppie and Levitan (1990), Layne (1992), O'Toole (1973), Stone (1971) and Winberg (1992).
11. My research on 'The New Year festivals in Cape Town' has been funded by the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (Paris), the Institut Français de Recherches en Afrique (Nairobi) and the Institut Français d'Afrique du Sud (Johannesburg), and supported by the English Department of the University of the Western Cape. Fieldwork was conducted in 1993 and 1994 and complemented on the occasion of regular visits to Cape Town afterwards; it involved observation of the festivals and a series of non-directive interviews, as well as reading in the South African Library. It has, up to now, resulted in a video documentary (Martin 1995b), several articles (among others Martin 1995a; Martin 1997) and a book (Martin 1999). I wish to thank the institutions that have made this research possible and all the Capetonians, too numerous to be mentioned here, without the generous help of whom such an investigation could not have been conducted.
12. Forty-one interviews have been recorded in 1994, several of them collective; the total number of interviewees was about 80.
13. Which does not mean, of course, that all changes in the Coons were caused by political events; only that they must be understood against the backdrop of political transformations.
14. Slavery lasted until 1833. It has been estimated that of all the slaves brought to South Africa, 36.4 per cent came from India, 31.47 per cent from the (Dutch) East Indies, 26.65 per cent from Africa (of the latter, more than half were brought from Madagascar) (Da Costa and Davids 1994: 2; Shell 1994; Worden 1994).
15. Interestingly, Guy Fawkes' Day has been celebrated by coloured people until today. A nice etching by Heinrich Egersdörfer, titled 'Coloured Orchestra' and possibly done in 1886 was published with the following caption: 'It is Guy Fawkes, and we all know this coloured orchestra, which is going from door to door, collecting pennies. With drum, fiddle and squashbox, their main purpose is to make a noise, and who will doubt that they have succeeded?' (Rosenthal 1960). Interviews conducted in 1994 tend to indicate that Guy Fawkes is frequently seen as a prelude to the New Year (see also Keeton 1987; O'Toole 1973: 103).

- 16 For instance, the Pumpkin Darkies came out of the Cape of Good Hope Sports Club, and the Highborn Coons of the Roslyn Sporting Club.
17. George Manuel quotes: '[O]ne old writer describing the event in 1888 said that their torch-light processions with "impromptu bands innumerable" added "to the grandeur of the funeral rites of the dead year"' (Franck et al. 1967: 111); but the *Cape Argus* Weekly Edition (6 January 1888: 17) wrote: 'A Malay torch-light procession paraded the streets during the evening; but it was a sorry turn out, consisting of about thirty torch bearers and individuals with Chinese lanterns, the *cortege* being escorted by a couple of policemen in order to preserve order.'
18. A painting by James Yates, 'Tweede Nuwe Jaar' (ca. 1905) represents Coons in District Six; the troupe's colours are hanging across the street; six men in top hat and tail coats, with large bowties, and black and white facial make-up sing in front of a house while children are listening (South African Library, *Readers' Digest* Collection).
19. wish to thank Gerald L. Stone for having given me a copy of his translation into English of this article by Jan Bouws.
20. In the *Cape Times* of 10 January 1959, Bert H. Hart (71 at the time of publication), life member of the Green Point Cricket Club, recalls how the first Coon Carnival competitions were organized at the Green Point Track '55 years ago' (that is, in 1904; here the date is erroneous):

The whole thing was the result of a gamble by a live-wire Australian. He was Harry Coggins, whom some old-timers will remember as a Western Province cricketer. Harry, a member of the Green Point club, knew that the club's finances were at rock bottom.

Yet he persuaded club officials to spend about £100—mostly on tick—on trophies for the Cape Coons. In those days they performed only sporadically. He suggested that a Coon Carnival should be held at the club's headquarters, the Green Point Track, and that the club should take any profits from that venture.

You will appreciate that £100 was a great deal of money in those days and there were some people who felt the gamble might prove costly. However, Harry was right. The Track was crowded and the Carnival such a success that it became a regular feature ever after.

The Green Point Cricket Club was put back on its feet and all the trophies were paid for. I know that because I was the man who sold them to Harry. I used in those days to work for a Cape Town firm of silversmiths.

In a report published by the *Argus* on 2 January 1907, it is mentioned that the carnival was 'inaugurated by the Green Point Cricket Club', which seems to substantiate this story.

21. 'It was intended to close the coloured people's effort with the Water Carnival and Regatta at Kalk Bay; but it is now decided to finish off with a Grand

Carnival on Green Point Track on Monday, 26th January, at eight o'clock' (The *APO*, 17 January 1920). See also *APO*, 31 January 1920.

22. 'For the past two years a number of Coloured troupes held a Carnival on Green Point Track and handed the takings over to Charity. Last year the Cape Town and Wynberg Board of Aid benefited to the extent of over one hundred pounds. The Cape Town Cricket Club—a white club—ran a Coloured Carnival for its own benefit at Newlands. Whether that venture was a financial success or not, is not known. But, apparently, the Club saw more profits going into its pockets if it held the Carnival on Green Point Track than at Newlands, so it forestalled the Coloured Committee and booked the Track months ahead and held two Carnivals, one in the afternoon of 3rd January, and the other the evening of the 23rd January.

How much money the white Cricket Club made out of these Coloured troupes is a secret. The profits will probably be devoted to improving the stands on the cricket ground on which no Coloured person will be permitted to sit ('Exploiting the Coloured Troupes', *APO*, 28 January 1922).

23. For, if the spectators at the stadia pay to watch the Coons, the Coons themselves have to buy their outfit.
24. These activities were at the centre of celebrations that took place, and still take place, in various countries when winter yields to spring, in Christian cultures either at Christmas or before Lent, sometimes both (d'Ayala and Boiteux 1988). Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz (1992) analyzes how they were transported from Portugal to Brazil and how the Rio Carnival developed and transformed from a European tradition to become a Creole celebration. A similar story can be told à propos of the Trinidad Carnival (Johnson 1984; Martin 1996; Toll 1988) and of most American or West Indian ones.
25. Space does not allow for even a brief history of the birth of the minstrel show in the United States. A few words on the origins of the use of 'coon' may, however, be useful here. A racoon appears as the trickster who gets the better of the opossum in the song 'Opossum Up a Gum Tree', possibly the first slave song to be adapted and interpreted by a white American singer in the 1820s. This song and many others based on the rivalry between an opossum and a racoon (including some versions of 'Jim Crow') became widely used in a new form of entertainment developed by white comedians, which became known as the 'Minstrel Show' (1843). One of the main characters of the show was the Zip Coon, or Dandy Jim, and minstrels were sometimes called 'Coon Minstrels'. In the beginning the minstrels were white comedians who made up their faces with burnt cork and drew white circles around their eyes and mouth; later black artists also created troupes of minstrels, but they too continued to make up their faces and dress in ragged tailcoats and top hats (see Lott 1993; Nathan 1946, 1952, 1977; Toll 1974).

26. For instance, the *Cape Mercantile Advertiser* of 20 September 1869 announced a show by an 'Amateur Coloured Troupe' to take place at the Old-Fellows' Hall, Plein Street, on the 20 September; among the items to be performed were: the overture of Lucrece Borgia, 'When You and I Were Young, Margie', 'De Darkies' Jubilee' and 'Malingo Hoy, the Cape Town Coolie (Dutch-Mozambique Lingo)'. Printed on the same page, another announcement advertised a show by the Cape Town Amateur Minstrels on the same day at the Cape Town Institute, Burger Street, 'to conclude with a New Negro Walk-round (written by Howard Clifton) "A Jolly Place is Cape Town"'.  
27. See *Supplement to the Cape Argus*, 21 August 1862; *Cape Argus*, 26 August 1862; *Cape Chronicle*, 22 August 1862, 26 September 1862, 7 November 1862.  
28. See East (1956), Franck et al. (1967: 110) and Stone (1971: 3); as previously, the source seems to have been Green (1951: 195).  
29. The HMS *Raleigh* was a British vessel that was then anchored at the Cape. Christy's Minstrel denotes the genre of the troupe, but the troupe itself was probably composed of amateur comedians who may have been members of its crew (*Argus*, 21 June 1887).

The *Cape Argus* announcement reads: The Royal Scots Variety Company: Part II, Minstrel Troupe, songs, jokes and ballads; Part III, side-splitting Negro farce entitled: 'Waxination Gratis' (5 July 1887: 2).

30. Their first concert in Cape Town was acclaimed in the press, and reports stressed that McAdoo's Singers were no ordinary black face minstrels: 'Singing such as is given by the Virginia Concert Company has never before been heard in this country. Their selection consist of a peculiar kind of part song, the different voices joining in almost unexpected moments in a wild kind of symphony' (*Argus*, 1 July 1890). The editorialist of *Imvo Zabantsundu* (an independent black weekly published in King Williamstown) expressed eloquently how they were perceived by black South African audiences:

It would strongly savour of presumption for a Native African of this part to venture a critique on his brethren from America who are now visiting this quarter of their fatherland, and whose position socially, is being deservedly pointed at on all hands as one that Native here should strive to attain to. But we may be allowed to join in the *huzzas* that have greeted their musical entertainment in the towns and cities they have visited. (*Imvo Zabantsundu* [Native Opinion], 16 October 1890)

31. Their story is told in Erlmann (1991); see also Erlmann (1997).  
32. The Dantu (or Dante) family has long been associated with Cape Town's clubs, from the Darktown Fire Brigade to contemporary Good Hope Entertainers, via the Honolulu Dainty Darkies. They have also been among the founders of the Cape Malay Choir Board.

33. Nurses and medical doctors are favourite masks in many a carnival; in Cape Town they still appeared in the 'special item' competitions of the 1990s, and there was a time when there used to be quite a number of them in Port of Spain's streets on Fat Monday and Tuesday.
34. In 1921, for instance: One of the best of the troupes was the 'Queen of Tar Tars':

[...] The Queen was Mazepa (not Mazeppa). She was quite a young girl; rode in what looked like a grandiose or metamorphose peanut barrow, and had her guard of honour, which fired a salute from a solitary cannon. The Queen was attired mainly in couleur de rose and wore a paper crown. Her gallant henchmen wore yellow costumes with green stripes, white stockings with green ribbons, white feather hats, and black shoes. (*Argus*, 4 January 1921: 8)

35. There was a period from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1970s when drum majorettes' competitions were introduced. They were dropped in the 1970s, although some troupes continued to include groups of majorettes in their marches until the beginning of the 1990s. I have been told in interviews that it had become too costly to arrange for special majorette costumes to be cut. Recently, young girls continued to parade, but they wore the same juvenile uniform as the boys.
36. Originally performed in the honour of Abu Bakr, the first *khalif*, friend and successor of Prophet Mohammed, it has become a ceremony whereby the rule of faith over the carnal envelope is demonstrated by flagellation and piercing of parts of the body with sharp objects (Desai 1983: 110–23).
37. Personal communication.
38. As it did in other contexts: elsewhere in South Africa (Coplan 1985: 71; Erlmann 1996) and also in West Africa (Barber et al. 1997).
39. Is it just by chance, for instance, that in January 1994 audiences at the Green Point Stadium danced in the stands to the sound of 'Give Me Hope, Johanna', a song created a few years earlier by Eddie Grant, and which before the South African general elections was dubbed the 'national anthem of Mitchell's Plain'; and that another very popular song with the troupes was borrowed from Walt Disney's studios' *Aladdin*, and announced 'A whole new world/A dazzling place I never knew [...] Unbelievable sights/Indescribable feelings/Soaring, tumbling, free-wheeling/Through an endless diamond sky' (words copied from the rehearsal board at the Good Hope Entertainers *klopskamer*, 12 December 1993).
40. Bobby Breen was the star of an American film that met with an incredible success in District Six's bioscopes: *Rainbow on the River* (1936, directed by Kurt Neumann). It tells the story of a white orphan who, after the Civil War, is brought up by a 'black mammy' and later discovers that he is rich.

41. Marike De Klerk, wife of former President De Klerk, quoted in 'What Marike De Klerk Once Had to Say about Other Race Groups', *Sunday Tribune*, 2 February 1989.
42. Moreover, the Apaches and Indian troupes have probably been started in Cape Town by West Indians. Victor Bryan who was in the 1950s captain of the Wild American Masqueraders, a troupe that was created in the 1920s or earlier, recalled that his 'father was a West Indian, and he had the idea to dress us up as Red Indians' (*Argus*, 31 December 1957). Another source confirms that The Wild American Masqueraders were founded by 'a Negro from America' even if his country of origin cannot be traced precisely (interview, 13 July 1997). 'Fancy Indians' are a traditional mask in several West-Indian carnivals, and of course the Indians are emblematic figures of New Orleans' Mardi Gras. But, in the case of Cape Town's Atjas, the West-Indian connection is substantiated by the association, in older times, of stilt walkers, very much like West-Indian 'moko jumbies', with Wild Indians' troupes (Trinidad Carnival 1988).
43. Troupe names reveal this humourous and sometimes contradictory denial of inferiority. A complete analysis of 485 troupe names collected in printed sources is not possible here, of course. It should be noted, however, that it is after 1952 that qualifiers such as 'fabulous', 'famous', 'grand', 'great' and 'invincible' are added to written troupe denominations. Calypso singers' sobriquets had the same function in Trinidad.
44. When the Coloured Affairs Department was created by Jan Smuts' government in 1943 to separate the administration of coloured affairs from the administration of white affairs, A.E. Abdurahman, son of Dr Abdurahman, was, within the APO, one of its staunch opponents and fought against any collaboration with it (Goldin 1987: 56; Lewis 1987: 213, 222).
45. 'The Coons' Carnival, an Asset Which is Not Fully Appreciated', from Dr I.D. du Plessis, University of Cape Town, *Cape Times*, 6 January 1936. See also his: 'Co-ordinate the Coons' (*Cape Times*, 8 November 1940); and 'City Could Have Fine Coon Procession', interview with du Plessis, former secretary for coloured affairs, *Cape Times*, 8 January 1970.
46. See *Cape Times*, 27 February 1952, 14, 15, 18 March 1952. On 2 April 1952 the same daily carried the following titles: 'Coloured People's Pageant Today, Boycott Plan Finds No Support, Close Identity with SA Life'. Appeals to boycott the Van Riebeeck Festival were regularly published in the *Torch*. See, for instance: *The Torch*, 12, 26 February 1952, 4, 25 March 1952.
47. Lyrics of the Malay choirs' songs are in Afrikaans, or in forms of High Dutch orally transmitted.
48. 'The organizers are gradually trying to get the troupes to sing more Cape *liedjies* and "moppies" [...] but the Coons dearly love the American sentimental songs' (Aschman 1949).  
 'Dr. I.D. du Plessis, who helped adjudicate the Afrikaans *liedjies*, appealed to the troupes not to neglect the songs of South Africa and of the Cape.

He hoped that the Cape “moppies” or comic songs and the liedjies would become a regular feature of future carnivals....

‘A feature of the coon song competitions at the Green Point Track yesterday were the Afrikaans “moppies”, or “liedjies”. The troupes were congratulated by Dr. I.D. du Plessis, one of the judges, on bringing this innovation into their carnivals’ (*Argus*, 10 January 1949).

49. This could be further illustrated, much beyond the scope of this paper, by taxes imposed on the troupes, by the tender system adopted to allocate stadia to carnival boards, and so on.
50. In an interview with Shannon Neill of the weekly *South* (21 January 1994: 8), Achmat Davids says: ‘In 1886 there were very active street parades of the Muslim street choirs and the Coons. In the same year there was a move to close the Muslim cemeteries in the Bo-Kaap. The people were able to organise resistance to this because of their tradition of organisation with the Carnival.’ See also Davids (1995).
51. Don Pinnock quotes an interview with Hadji Noor Denis. The *Argus* reports in its edition of 9 January 1950 that after a dispute had developed between rival Coon troupes while the trophies were presented, the mayoress was hit by missiles aimed at Coons.
52. ‘Boos greet riot squad at stadium: [...] A tenth group, dressed in gay and fashionable camouflage uniforms came bouncing into the arena but instead of the traditional cheers, loud boos and jeers heralded their appearance. They were a 20-man unit of the riot squad. As they sat down a coon captain said to me: “Now there is going to be trouble. This is unnecessary.”’ ‘However, their appearance was brought to an end long before they got the chance to sing the “juvenile sentimental” or the “Afrikaanse moppie” when they were invited to leave by M. Cassiem Banoo of the Athlone and District Coon Carnival Board. And they promptly left’ (*Cape Herald*, 4 January 1977).
53. ‘Behind the Festival of Hate, “The Cape Colourful Coons”’ (*Torch*, 25 March 1952: 2).
54. See *Cape Times*, 23 January 1952, 27 February 1952, 14, 15 and 18 March 1952 and 2 April 1952. The members of a troupe booked to perform in the United Kingdom were refused passports to travel outside South Africa after they declined to take part in the Van Riebeeck Festival (*Cape Times*, 15 and 22 July 1952).
55. The duties of a troupe captain such as described and analysed by Gerald Stone in 1971 have not changed much. After District Six’s inhabitants were relocated in distant neighbourhoods and people who used to live in the same building or in the same street found themselves scattered in the Cape Flats, the fact that most *klopse* (sometimes in spite of their names) attracted people coming from many ‘townships’ helped create social networks in this new hostile environment.
56. Interestingly, in her study of oral literature in Martinique and Guadeloupe, Maryse Condé stresses the ubiquitous phrase ‘*Un nègre ne meurt jamais*’

(‘a Negro never dies’): ‘Paradoxically, Negroes have faith in themselves, in their resistance, in their capacity to survive. “A Negro never dies.” They are the weed none can get rid of. Negroes have survived the middle passage. They have survived strokes, scaffolds, dogs’ jaws [...] Hated, scorned, they have nevertheless invaded the islands; they have nevertheless shaped the Whites to their semblance, before giving West Indian civilisations their idiosyncratic figure’ (Condé 1978: 32).

57. Personal communications.

58. Interviewees discussed at length the wealth of talents hidden in the community, the fact that it was impossible for them to blossom in apartheid South Africa, and that when given the chance they achieved worldwide fame. The most often mentioned names were jazz musician Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand), pop guitar player and singer Jonathan Butler and opera tenor Joseph Gabriels, and it was always emphasized that ‘they began in the Coons’.

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# EPILOGUE

EDITORS

The most significant aspect of communication pertains to the form of social relations specifically set up by the various modes of exchange, circulation of knowledge and cultural practice at large. As a consequence, any attempt of transmission of knowledge, and its representation, may take the measure of its efficiency only through evaluating the social processes it actually engineers. The social process mediated by a medium—and the way cultural practice is socially produced and consumed—are more important than the message/symbolism they carry. Communication being conceived as a dialectical encounter, the means and message in themselves or in isolation are only instrumental to this, and, therefore, of secondary significance. Besides, there is never any cultural *creation* (producing a thing, here, a meaning, from absolute nothingness), but only *transformation* and *re-creation*. This transformational approach is grounded in the refutation of an essentialist approach by which ideas would be disseminated through the channels of ‘works’, ‘authors’, ‘influences’ and the like. This classical vision of the history of ideas, challenged by Foucault (1969), was unable to cope with the discontinuities, disruptions, singularities, and patterns of dominance and resistance that characterize the circulation of ideas.

## New Research Perspectives

Anthropologists have long pointed to oral traditions as substantive references forging bonds of thought, conduct and action, especially

in communities bereft of a written script. It has been observed that collective memory is not a result of a word-to-word orality; rather, it operates with variations, to the extent that mnemonic procedures are rarely perceived as necessary (Goody 1977). However, one may point out that mnemonic procedures become necessary when associated with the maintenance of power structures: the orality of the Vedas is mnemonic, while that of grindmill songs is not so. Thus, in pre-industrial cultural practices 'power' seems to mechanize orality in a manner strikingly similar to how it homogenizes representation in the industrial mass media. While sociologists in the last two decades have found substance in popular oral narratives, common sense and shared representations (Ariès 1988: 167–90; Hinchman and Hinchman 1997: 7–50), historians have recognized these as epistemologically 'valid' and valuable sources for constructing their interpretations (Carr 1986). Collective memory, the raw material of history and identity, represented through a cumulative wealth of oral, written or symbolic forms, has become a fish tank for the conscious historian to draw from, for the critical social scientist to draw upon, and for the 'unconscious' persons to draw on in their everyday lives. Since 'source material' is invariably contentious, its wider catchment might well expand the topography and geology of confrontation in the years to come.

Although not as its primary, explicit objective, this anthology on communication processes contributes to the body of critical knowledge seeking to finally bury the 1970s notion of 'traditional form, modern content'—along with its stimulant, 'modernization' and its agency 'development communication'. While so far the notions of tradition and modernity were considered oppositional and mutually exclusive, it has long been realized that we actually stand at a crossroads, wherein their dialectics yield a set of merging or overlapping articulations. The notion of multilateral transitivity enumerated at the beginning signals the methodological rationale for such a departure from the sterile dualism (uncritical dichotomy) hitherto ingraining communication writing and policy. Related to this is also the pointlessness of arguing over the superiority of one cultural form over another—performance over media, pre-industrial over electronic media, speech over print, song over speech, as each is rooted in its own institutional potentialities and limitations. It would be more appropriate to analyze whether with the universalization of dominant norms marginalized figures of

symbolic activity survive by becoming increasingly insular or increasingly osmotic—as survive they will as long as the aggregate of their productive base survives.

Cultural studies and the sociology of communication have predominantly been obsessed with cinema and television. This general tendency could be explained by looking at its reactive and proactive roots—the former indicative of investigators being swayed by the discursively dominant locales of the mass media, and the latter reflecting recent academic inroads made by globally trendy frames of criticism. The resultant writings have sidelined scrutinizing communication as a process; in addressing a part of the whole, the emergent writings have come to be unidimensional. Furthermore, dominant approaches herein have failed to grasp the fact that the often celebrated diversity of symbolic forms and the resulting multiplicity in modes of communication are, in their essence, indicative of the fission and fusion within contemporary culture-scape.

This third, ‘cultural’, panel of our triptych may have addressed some of these shortcomings. In doing so, while this anthology highlights various modes of the ‘remnant’ and the ‘preserved’, the imposed and the hybrid, it equally addresses ways in which such symbolic configurations emerge in interrelationship with specific individual motivations and altering social contexts. What gains significance is not the multiplicity of cultural forms per se, but the role of the multiple dialectics shaping the rapport between human beings, and the corresponding articulation of social relations on longstanding practices and particular moments of symbolic production and reproduction. Revealed implicitly in this arrangement of issues is also a semantic elasticity of ‘culture’ and ‘communication’—sometimes construed as a means of the social transmission of information, knowledge and ideology; other times as cognitive systems capable of exchange with one another and with established systems of interaction (Carey 1989).

All through these seemingly varied explorations seek to locate, and thereby view, communication as part of larger, interrelated social processes of the past and the historical present. Nevertheless, what is also hinted is that ‘communication’ and ‘culture’ cannot designate a separate subject of investigation. For, their activities must be approached within the larger historical fabric and structures of cognition in which they unfold on the one hand, and with reference to the

particular social agents who intervene with their own competence and authority on the other. Therefore, a more accurate operationalization of communication as a social science concept has been necessarily grounded in its multidisciplinary dimensions. In doing so, the horizon of questions on 'communication' has to cover and measure up to the whole system of social relations that a particular form of symbolic activity incorporates.

## Hints towards Social and Political Change

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To study such symbolic forms and practices implies to analyse the articulations that cultural interventions, first, project by themselves on account of their internal structuring, and, second, tend to inaugurate at the level of society at large. As a corollary, analytical tasks ought to bear upon the nature of the particular social rapport that distinctive practices of communication implicitly, overtly, unwittingly or otherwise shape, while simultaneously unveiling its interventionist purposes. In doing so, one needs to be cautious that abstract consciousness and its purely verbal assertion may yield a non-productive discourse as long as it does not incorporate concrete forms of human relations and symbolic configurations commensurate with the historical intent of social transformation.

This perception of the absolute importance of the *use*—and not the *content*—of forms by speakers/discourses tends to empty any form as such and focus on the *power* intentions (cultural hegemony, domination, or resistance and inversion, let alone perversion, etc.) by those who *instrumentalize* them. Having said this, can the methodological considerations of our critique claim any relevance to the agents of communication and culture, be they practitioners or theorists, in their interventionist objectives? Equally, in an era exemplified by the seduction of appropriating post-industrial technological means, have our substantive considerations prevented losing sight of the way in which pre-industrial cultural practices are being reappropriated, especially independent of 'hitechnology'?

Future research may well benefit from the methodological considerations pursued in this anthology, especially those seeking to give

the exercise of research itself the shape of a critical communicative process. For, first, it has been realized that the more discrepancy between the informant's and observer's cultures, the greater the danger of ethnocentric misrepresentation by an alien framework of interpretation. In other words, a relation of dominance and subjection resulting in heteronomy and dependency may easily, though unknowingly, characterize forms and procedures of knowledge production in the field of cultural studies. Second, and often as a consequence, it may be evident that these writings are not concerned with analytical objectives alone, but equally with tempering a defiant cultural action—something that a conceptually informed, analytically critical and methodologically cooperative approach can better serve. Through such a reappropriation (both deconstruction and reactivation) the validity and relevance of research becomes a function of the quality, equality and intensity of the interaction within, and integral to, the design and procedures of the research exercise. Thus, communication—in form and content—and its study as a social process, proves to be a constitutive dimension of the relations of the production of knowledge itself.

Assuming that any act of 'culture' is an intervention in sculpting social change, cultural criticism must incessantly review the direction to such change. This may entail uncovering the critical modalities conducive to processes of interbreeding between contrasting symbolic forms and semantic systems, and sketching ethnographic accounts of social actors' metamorphosis from unconscious agents of a counter-political culture to pivots of a counter-cultural politics. In either case, the broader aim would be to congregate human entities on the ground of permanently dialectic communication processes, without a break of continuity either in time—opposing the 'traditional' with the 'modern'—or in space—opposing collectives with communities as isolated systems of symbolic exchange.

A cultural form is only a *medium* that gets its semantics from its *use* and not the reverse, as we usually believe. Of course, the medium has its own internal structure and cannot always easily be put upside down from within. This structure means semantic constraints in reuse, and we may concede that we cannot say anything with an arbitrary form. Still, the processes of reappropriation, reinvestment, manipulation, etc. would lead to stressing the great malleability to which cultural forms are subject.

This opens up the possibility of ‘cultural progress’, which is of great relevance to political and social change, at a time there is a growing awareness that the problems humankind is faced with cannot all be circumscribed in the field of economics. It is time to dig out ways of thinking—‘cultural objects’—and understand ‘not merely what people thought but how they thought [and communicated]—how they construed the world, invested it with meaning and infused it with emotion’ (Darnton 1985: 3) This approach has the potential to reconfigure the political landscape by displacing its focus from the economical to the multitude of ‘unidentified political objects’ (Martin 2002). ‘The political can no longer be circumscribed in the sole field of *politics*.... it outflanks it from both sides through multiple ethical demands’ (Caillé 2002).<sup>1</sup> In his pamphlet ‘Beyond the Left’, Caillé (ibid.) argues that political disputes limited to the economical battlefield are bound to obfuscate the most important cultural issues displayed as seemingly unrelated multiple identity crises:

The historical Left singled itself out with the belief that all the inequalities it must fight would be ‘in the final analysis’ associated with the economical disparities between the owners and the deprived. However, the main disputes over the past twenty years have been based on entirely different disparities, which were actually not displayed as disparities, but rather in the form of identity assertions: identity of gender, of sexuality, skin complexion, culture, habitat, religion, nature, etc.<sup>2</sup>

This ends up in exacerbating claims for individual freedom and shaking the very roots of democracy:

The political scene is becoming less and less attractive for the simple reason that it is still structured around the sole economical disparities. As such, it is not really able to give voice and shape to the other ones, except by multiplying rights, sometimes even the right to have rights. Because it fails to articulate with a renewed idea of democracy, this headlong rush might quickly turn self-destructive. The rights of all cannot be multiplied *ad infinitum* without sinking into a widespread exacerbated utilitarian individualism in which the only thing that counts is everyone’s pleasure. (ibid.)<sup>3</sup>

The blindness of politicians and citizens to the cultural dimensions of power and social communication unavoidably dissolves the dialectics

of political change into their passive surrender to economic rationality and market forces:

After all is said and done, the only system that acknowledges in(de)finite rights is the market. Provided that these rights are only those of the consumers and that they are proportional to the purchasing power. Here things come full circle and we are back in the face of economical disparities of the old Left. (ibid.)<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to this submissive attitude, remoulding the ‘cultural’ as the ‘contentious’ amounts to understanding, evaluating and re-appropriating the symbolic forms underlying the social systems of relations, as demonstrated in multiple ways throughout this series on communication processes:

It results that ‘the symbolic’, in politics, should not be reduced to the manipulations that may be engineered by people in power to obtain the obedience and submissiveness of the governed. It extends to the entirety of power relations, among which it may be distributed in numerous roles. (Martin 2002: 25)<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

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1. Original text: ‘[L]e politique ne peut plus être circonscrit au seul champ de la politique.... il le déborde de part en part à travers de multiples exigences éthiques.’
2. Original text: ‘La Gauche historique s’est caractérisée par la certitude que toutes les iné-galités à combattre se rapportaient ‘en dernière instance’ à l’inégalité économique entre possédants et dépossédés. Or, les combats principaux des vingt dernières années ont porté sur de toutes autres in-égalités, qui ne se présentaient d’ailleurs pas tant comme telles que sous la forme de l’affirmation d’identités, identités de genres, de sexualités, de couleurs, de cultures, d’habitats, de religions, de natures, etc.’
3. Original text: ‘Si le jeu de la politique peine de plus en plus à mobiliser les passions, c’est parce qu’il reste profondément structuré par la lutte autour des seules inégalités économiques et ne sait pas trop comment donner voix et forme aux autres, sauf à travers la multiplication des droits, voire des droits à avoir des droits. Or, faute de s’articuler à une pensée renouvelée de la démocratie, cette fuite en avant risque de se révéler rapidement autodestructrice. Les droits de tous ne peuvent pas se multiplier à l’infini

sans s'affaïsser dans un hyperindividualisme utilitariste généralisé, où seul compte le bon plaisir de chacun.'

4. Original text: 'En définitive, le seul système qui reconnaisse des droits in(dé)finis, c'est le système de marché. Mais à la condition que ces droits soient exclusivement ceux des consommateurs et qu'ils soient proportionnels au pouvoir d'achat. Où la boucle se boucle et où l'on retrouve les inégalités économiques de la vieille gauche.'
5. Original text: 'Il en résulte que la présence du symbolique en politique ne saurait être réduite aux manipulations qui peuvent en être faites par les puissants pour obtenir la passivité, la soumission des gouvernés, mais qu'il parcourt la totalité des relations de pouvoir dans lesquelles il peut être distribué en d'innombrables rôles.'

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# ABOUT THE EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

## The Editors

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**Bernard Bel** is a computer scientist with background in electronics. He came to India in 1979 to conduct a multidisciplinary scientific study of classical music. In 1986 he joined the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) to develop new models and techniques in the field of computational musicology. Between 1994 and 1998 he was deputed to the Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH, New Delhi) to carry on projects in musicology and social-cultural anthropology. He then monitored a programme on the relations between power, communication and culture. At present, he is at the Laboratoire Parole et Language (CNRS, Aix-en-Provence), member of a team focusing on speech prosody. He is also in charge of a web service for a free exchange of linguistic data and resources (CRDO).

**Jan Brouwer** recently retired as Professor of Cultural Anthropology from the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. He is presently Professor of Anthropology at the University School of Design, University of Mysore and Honorary Director at the Centre for Advanced Research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (CARIKS, Mysore). He has many published works to his credit and is currently working on the concept of autonomy and death as a social relation.

**Biswajit Das** is currently the Director of Centre for Culture, Media and Governance, Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi. He has over two decades of teaching experience and specialized research in communication studies, during which he was also a visiting fellow at the Universities of Windsor, Canada and Hawaii, USA. His research has been supported by various foundations and institutions in India and abroad such as

Indo-Canadian Institute of Advanced Studies and Charles Wallace Trust.

**Vibodh Parthasarathi** maintains a multidisciplinary interest in the creative industries, cross-national communication policy, business history of the media and governance of media infrastructure. Currently, he is Associate Professor, Centre for Culture, Media and Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia (New Delhi). He was earlier associated with the Centre for Jawaharlal Nehru Studies also at Jamia Millia Islamia, Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (CCRSS, Pune) and Manipal Institute of Communication (Manipal). He is the co-editor of *L'idiot du Village Mondial* (Editions Luc Pire/ECLM 2004), *Media and Mediation* (Sage 2005), and *The Social and the Symbolic* (Sage 2007). His work has attracted support variously from the India Foundation for the Arts, the Netherlands Fellowship Programme, Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation, Charles Wallace India Trust and Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. Periodically on assignment with the media industry, his last documentary *Crosscurrents: A Fijian Travelogue* (2001) explored the underbelly of 'reconciliation' following a decade of military coups in Fiji. His nominations include Board Member, Centre for Internet and Society (Bangalore), Non-Executive Director, Kadam Films Ltd (New Delhi), Independent Director, Centre for Social Ecology (Jaipur), Founding International Member, Intercultural Library for the Future (Paris) and Member, Academic Council, Institute of Social Studies (the Hague).

**Guy Poitevin** was born in Mayenne (France), settled in Pune since 1972 and naturalized as an Indian citizen in 1978. He was a graduate in Philosophy (Sorbonne and Gregoriana) and Theology (Gregoriana), and taught philosophy before obtaining his Ph.D. in Social Sciences from Paris University. He created and animated grassroots action groups in rural Maharashtra. Till his demise in 2004, he was the Director of the CCRSS (Pune), which he founded in 1982 for researches on social and cultural dynamics specific to the subaltern and people's oral cultures, and for experimenting to this effect with alternative research practices called 'cooperative' and meant to jointly harness the researcher and the activist to goals of social transformation.

## The Contributors

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**P.J. Amala Dos** is a Therukoothu folk artist, President of the Folk Artists Federation of Tamil Nadu. He was nominated by the Governor of Tamil Nadu as a member of the State Academy, Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram, which conducts festivals and imparts Therukoothu and folk arts training to members of voluntary agencies, students and university teachers. He works at present for and with the folk artists with the conviction that as the artists remain the owners of their media, they can help awake people to their rights and organize themselves in their own way for emancipation.

**Karine Bates** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology, Université de Montréal. She works in the field of legal anthropology. Inspired by her training in law (B.C.L., LL.B.) and anthropology, she has developed an ethnographic methodology to grasp the nuances of women's discourses and practices in the process of obtaining their property and inheritance rights through the state legal bureaucracy in India. Also, her research focuses on the interplay between formal and informal factors of access of justice and the role of para-legal women's organization in the mediation of conflicts occurring at the level of the household. So far, her fieldwork took place in Maharashtra and Kerala.

**Paul Biot** is co-founder (in the beginning of the 1970s) and now manager of the Centre du Théâtre Action, an agency that coordinates projects carried out by the fifteen Belgian companies of the Action Theatre movement operating among the French-speaking population in Belgium. The companies' members help collectives to perform according to their aims. Every alternate year they organize a festival 'Theatre on the Path of Resistance', to which they invite from other parts of the worlds, groups which share the same objectives. They also create their own performances with no limitations on forms, but those forms only which are imagined, created, produced collectively, and played by the very people who created them for social change. Paul Biot is a Doctor in Law too.

**Geneviève Caelen-Haumont** is a linguist and specialist of speech prosody, currently affiliated to the Laboratoire Parole et Language (CNRS, Aix-en-Provence) and the International Research Center MICA (Hanoi Institute of Technology).

**Gyaneshwar Chaturvedi** is Head of Department, Political Science, St. John's College, Agra, and has been engaged in an ongoing field research on ethnic violence in Kanpur. A graduate from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, his main research interests are in identity formation, especially in the context of cross-cultural encounters and multiculturalism. His present concerns include the interrelationship between image and reality.

**Jayati Chaturvedi** was Reader & Head, Department of Political Science, St. John's College, Agra, India. She has been a Rotary Fellow, worked for a while as a Consultant for CARE (Cooperation for Assistance & Relief Everywhere), travelled internationally on academic assignments and believes her strength lies as a field researcher on identity issues. She now lives and teaches in London.

**Kajri Jain** teaches in the Centre for Visual and Media Culture and the Graduate Department of Art at the University of Toronto. Her research is on popular image-cultures in India, with a particular focus on the interface between religion, visual culture and vernacular business cultures; she is the author of *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (2007). Initially trained as a graphic designer at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India. Jain has a Ph.D. in Art History from the University of Sydney, held postdoctoral fellowships with the Australian Research Council and the Getty Research Institute, and has taught in departments of Art History, Cultural Studies and Film Studies in Australia, the US and Canada.

**Jitendra Maid**, the fifth of six brothers and one sister, and son of a labourer father in the Market Yard of Shirur (Pune district), did odd jobs to finance his graduate degree in Commerce, Communication and Journalism. He joined a local action group committed to social awakening through street theatre. Now fully involved in VCDA

activities as coordinator, he monitors a workshop of self-learning for rural grassroots action groups and their network all over Maharashtra. He also participates in the research activities of the Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences (such as grindmill songs, oral myths, caste memories, Dalit literature, people's culture and communication).

**Denis-Constant Martin** has degrees in Sociology, Political Sciences and African Linguistics (Swahili), and a Ph.D. from Sorbonne. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the African Studies Centre, Science Po Bordeaux, Université de Bordeaux. He was the founder and first director (1980) of the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA). He has taught at the Institute of Political Studies (Paris) and Sorbonne, and conducted abundant field research in Eastern and Southern Africa as well as in the Commonwealth Caribbean. In recent years, his focus has been on the relationships between culture and politics, with a particular interest in popular festivals (carnivals, for instance) and popular music, emphasizing on the political expression of communal identities.

**Badri Narayan** is Lecturer in Social Cultural Anthropology, G.B. Pant Social Sciences Institute (Allahabad). A social historian by training, he later turned to cultural anthropology. Central interest include the invisible drives that structure the social fabric, forms and ways of social protest, popular culture and popular memory, Dalit literature, language and symbolic power. He is a committed organizer and cultural activist involved in the preservation of popular culture in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh society.

**Hema Rairkar** is a graduate in Economics who worked at the Gokhale Institute of Economic and Political Sciences (Pune) but left in 1991 to get involved in the research projects of the CCRSS. She is actively associated with action groups of peasant women in villages of Pune district. Since 1983 she has conducted a vast systematic research in the Marathi-speaking areas of western India on the women's tradition of grindmill songs. She has organized seminars and debates in colleges and villages on folk culture and knowledge cooperatively with peasant animators in a spirit of reflexive reappropriation of one's heritage.

**Kusum Sonavne** is a leading animator of the rural action group Garib Dongari Sanghatna (GDS) or 'Poor of the Mountain' (Pune). Born in a very poor Dalit family, she was eager to go to school, but her mother forced her back to tend cattle. Deserting school after Standard I, she was married at 12 to a boy working as a stone crusher at Mumbai with his parents. They returned to the village when strikes resulted in loss of jobs, where Sonavne worked as maidservant in various houses. Fond of singing to overcome fatigue and find strength, she started to attend GDS meetings in 1980 with her 3-month-old baby in surrounding villages. Gradually, she learnt to raise local groups to fight local issues. Presently, she works at launching similar groups in other areas of Pune district.

**Tara Ubhe** was born in Kolawde (Mulshi *taluka*, Pune district), and forced to leave school in Standard III. She was married at 14, and was 19 when her third and last son was born. Her family are very small farmers producing mainly paddy on half an acre of land, living from land and agricultural work. She joined the GDS in 1985 of which she is one of the leading women animators on issues of tribal communities, rural employment, organization of labourers, primary health education, gender issues and network of rural social workers in Maharashtra. She has participated in the action research of the CCRSS on grindmill songs.

**Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay** is a Reader of History, Indira Gandhi National Open University (New Delhi). His publications include *Existence, Identity and Mobilization: The Cotton Millworkers of Bombay, 1890–1919*, and a volume (co-edited with Imtiaz Ahmad) *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History*. Besides these, he has published articles on the working class, Dalits and Premchand.